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SNAKES

WILLIAM CAINE



1. Fiction, English



NCW  
Caine



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# **GREAT-SNAKES!**

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***BY THE SAME AUTHOR***

**BILDAD THE QUILL-DRIVER  
BUT SHE MEANT WELL  
THE IRRESISTIBLE INTRUDER  
HOFFMAN'S CHANCE  
PILKINGTON  
THE CONFECTIONERS (with JOHN FAIRBAIRN)  
THE PURSUIT OF THE PRESIDENT  
THE VICTIM AND THE VOTERY  
BOOM  
A PRISONER IN SPAIN  
THE REVOLT AT ROSKELLY'S  
OLD ENOUGH TO KNOW BETTER  
THE DEVIL IN SOLUTION  
SAVE US FROM OUR FRIENDS  
AN ANGLER AT LARGE  
THE NEW FORESTERS**

# **GREAT-SNAKES!**

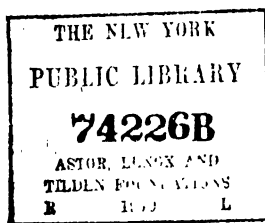
**A VARIATION ON A  
CLASSICAL THEME**

**BY WILLIAM CAINE**

**NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY  
LONDON: JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD  
MCMXVI**

MRS





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## **GREAT-SNAKES!**

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## CHAPTER I

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### Mr. Bouverie Acts on Advice

**M**R. BOUVERIE woke, unrefreshed, and gazed vacantly about the room, blinking.

For a few moments it occurred to him that he was still dreaming, for his eyes lit on none of those objects with which, on their first opening for the day, they were familiar. To begin with, this was not his bedroom. It was not, indeed, anybody's bedroom. It was a sitting-room. The seven dozen of assorted photographs, calling cards, and invitations which fringed the mirror, the cottage piano, the solid round table in the middle of the floor, the microscope on the roll-top desk, the stuffed trout on one side of the fireplace and the case of missel thrushes on the other, the butterfly-cabinet on the what-not, the syphon and decanter on the sideboard. . . .

Mr. Bouverie rose unsteadily to his feet. He suffered from a sensation of extreme nausea; his

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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temples felt as if a piece of cord had been applied to them with a tourniquet; and the inside of his mouth was a thing of terror. No. There could be no doubt that he was awake. He found his way among the furniture to a long drink. Then he stared owlishly at the clock on the mantelpiece and noted that the hour was nearly eight—presumably, from the sun which streamed into the room, in the morning. He looked at his watch. It had stopped at three minutes past four.

“I wonder,” he muttered, “how I got here. Oh, what a night it mussa been!”

His glance flickered back to the clock, travelled a little higher and encountered that of a gentleman in full evening dress who wore on his head, jauntily enough, a lady’s hat, with nodding purple ostrich plumes, which had been secured by a red and yellow silk handkerchief knotted under the chin. From the middle of this inharmonious blaze of colour his own chalky face started out at him.

“It’s me,” he whispered. “OH, what a night it——”

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## MR. BOUVERIE ACTS ON ADVICE

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The door opened, and a young, healthy-looking man entered the room.

"Hullo, Bouverie, my bird!" he said. "Stirring already?"

Bouverie regarded him with a glassy eye.

"Leyborne," he announced. "It's Leyborne."

"That's right," said the other. Bouverie nodded his head sagely.

"This your place, Leyborne?" he asked. "Haven't ever bin here before, have I?"

"No," said Leyborne. "But now I've found your way for you, eh?—you'll come again?"

"Don't know you partil—particularly well, do I?" asked Bouverie. "Met you round about, haven't I? Friend of my friend Porges, ain't you?"

"That's right," said Leyborne. "Porges of Thomas's."

"Very hospitable of you, I'm sure," remarked Bouverie. "No claims on your gralitude, have I?"

"Don't say another word about it," said his host. "Any one would have done as much."

"No," said Bouverie solemnly. "No, Leyborne. Wrong. All wrong. Another man



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## GREAT SNAKES!

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would have left me to me fate. Vile Street, old son. You're a good feh-lo, Leyborne, and that's what's the matter with you. Was I very—very——?”

“Immortal,” said Leyborne. “I found you close by here, in Kennington Lane. Came up just as your cabman was going to shoot you out on the pavement. He said they'd given him a wrong address for you. Nobody in the street knew anything about you.”

“Silly ass,” said Bouverie with a chuckle. “How should they? Never been here in my life. Avoid South Side always. It mussa been a joke of some of the boys. Dashed low trick. I'd tell 'em what I think of them, only I dunno who they were. Well, Leyborne, I'm very much obliged to you. Most friendly ack of yours. But I won't trespass on your hopsi—on your hospital—on your *kindness* any more. I'll just trot-talong, old son.”

“No, you won't,” said Leyborne. “You're going to have a bath first, and a shave, if I shave you; and you're going to put on some of my togs.”

“By Jove, Leyborne,” cried Bouverie grate-

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## MR. BOUVERIE ACTS ON ADVICE

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fully, "you *are* a magnificent sportsman. D'you mean all that? By Jove, I've got to drink your jollygoodealth."

He directed the least unruly of his eyes towards the sideboard.

"Not on your life!" cried the other. "Come on. Off with the hat. I didn't like to part you from it till you'd seen yourself. I can't imagine a finer pick-me-up than your reflection. Now let's see what I've got that you can wear."

In half an hour's time, Mr. Bouverie, washed, shaved, clothed and in his right mind, returned to the sitting-room, where, during the interval, Leyborne's housekeeper had laid out some breakfast. This he attacked without enthusiasm, but with fair success, for youth and an iron constitution had collaborated with cold water and a clean shave (restorer of self-respect) largely to dissipate the effects of debauchery. Leyborne smoked a pipe and exerted himself to entertain his guest.

By the time he had swallowed three cups of strong tea and fried whiting and a rackful of toast, Bouverie had reached that point where loathing and horror of the night's excesses give place to a humorous self-condemnation mingled

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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with a certain measure of pride in a great achievement. Soon he was pleasurablely launched upon the enumeration, so far as it lay in his power, of his refreshments.

"To begin with," he said, "there was I and Bailey—Jim, not his brother Arthur, you know. He called for me at my place in Charing Cross Road before lunch. Or did I call for him at his club after lunch? Well, it doesn't matter, does it? We had lunch together, anyhow. It was at the Troc. No, that was where we dined. That is to say *Arthur* and I did. I can swear Jim wasn't at dinner. To tell you the truth, I don't know where Jim was at dinner time. But it don't signify, does it? Well then, I and Jim or Arthur or whoever it was cracked a bottle of the best at lunch and we had two green char-*treuses* afterwards and a peach brandy each with our coffee. Jim or Arthur or whoever it was——"

"Call him Jarthur," suggested Leyborne helpfully.

"Right oh! Well, this Jarthur proposed billiards while there was yet time. But I said 'No. Billiards be blowed!' Jarthur said he liked bil-

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## MR. BOUVERIE ACTS ON ADVICE

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liards. I said they were rotten. I say, are billiards 'they' or 'it'?"

"Try 'thit' and chance it. What did you do next?"

"Well, I said this peach brandy was good enough for me, so that settled it. We had five more each. It may've been six, but it was certainly five. That I can swear to. Then we got tired of sitting still and so we went for a toddle round. At the Leicester we met the other fellow, Jim or Arthur or Arthur or Jim or whoever he was. That was about four o'clock. At the Leicester we had a gin and soda apiece. Then we gave the Europe a turn and there we met some very nice men whom none of us knew; but that didn't matter, did it? I wanted a little strengthening by this time and I had brandy from then till dinner, I dare say half a dozen. I slipped home about seven and changed, and then I met my friend, whoever he was, at the Troc, and we had a triumphant time. I'm pretty sure there were three of us—p'r'aps *he* brought a friend—because we had a brace of magnums and that'd have been rather a lot for just two, eh? I say, I'm not boring you with all this, am I?"

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## GREAT SNAKES!

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asked Mr. Bouverie in the manner of a golfer who has just told you how he reached the eleventh green in thirteen.

"Not at all," said Leyborne politely. "I am very anxious to hear what you swallowed next."

"Oh!" said Bouverie, wagging a finger at him. "That's where you'll be disappointed, old man, because this is where my memory becomes so very rocky. We must have had a liqueur of some sort after dinner. We would, of course, wouldn't we? P'r'aps two. But I confess I don't know much about the rest of the night. I *believe* we were at the Empire, because of that counterfoil in my pocket, and I *seem* to remember dancin' and drivin' in a taxi, chock full of people, and I think I was in a man's rooms, playin' cards or roulette or something, and I *was* at a coffee-stall at one time or another, because I remember pourin' some coffee over myself, and there *is* a mark on my shirt front, you know. I must have been miraculous. And if it hadn't been for you, old friend——" His voice broke with emotion. "You've behaved like a real gentleman, Leyborne," he went on. "You've fed me and clothed me and taken me in. You couldn't have done [16]

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## MR. BOUVERIE ACTS ON ADVICE

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more for me, if I'd owed you a thousand quid. Well, I'll be toddling now."

He rose from the table and reached an unsteady hand towards his host.

"Sit down," said Leyborne. "I want to talk to you. Has it ever occurred to you where you're going?"

"Oh," said Bouverie cheerfully, "I shall find somebody knockin' about."

"I don't mean where you're going now, my gay Bohemian boy. But ultimately. If you don't know, I'll tell you. You're going to the devil."

"Not a bit of it. Only having my fling, Leyborne. You wouldn't deny me my fling. Every man's entitled to his fling."

"You've been flinging to my certain knowledge for the last year and a half. It's time you dropped it. Ring off, Bouverie, or you'll begin to see things. I give you my word, as a medical man."

Bouverie paled.

"I say, old man, it's not so bad as that, is it? You don't think I've been goin' too strong, eh? No, you're chaffin'. There's no fear of *that* for me. I have myself well in hand. Haven't I?" he added rather pitifully.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"I wouldn't go so far," said Leyborne, "as to threaten you with a drunkard's grave within the year, but, as a medical man, I should earnestly advise you to give it a breeze for a time. You want rest and change of air, my boy. You go away to some nice, quiet country place for a week or two."

"Brighton?" suggested Bouverie hopefully. "Wonderful air."

"Brighton be hanged! Why not Paris?"

"Well, why not?" cried Bouverie. "Complete change. Picture galleries. French language and all that."

"My lad," said Leyborne, "your case demands more drastic treatment still. Now I'll tell you what. Pack a bag and jump into a train at Waterloo for Berwick Charity. Take a fly and drive to Mulberry Farm in the middle of Great Beeches. Give Mrs. Tichborne my name and tell her you've come for a fortnight. Great friend of mine, Mrs. Tichborne. I heard from her only this morning saying the Forest's looking its best, and when did I expect to be coming to see it this summer? She has three people staying with her, she says, but it's a large house. She can put

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## MR. BOUVERIE ACTS ON ADVICE

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up eight easily. You'll find room all right. So down you go this morning, and for a fortnight live on cream and fresh eggs and chickens and home-cured ham; walk abroad in the Forest; and you'll wonder how you could ever live in London."

"My experience of the country," said Bouverie judicially, "is, that when you're there, you put in most of your time wondering why ever you came *out* of London. But I believe you're right, Leyborne. I'd better go slow for a bit. Where did you say it was?"

Twenty-four hours earlier, the programme of country delights which Leyborne had so alluringly sketched would have made very little impression on Mr. Bouverie. But Leyborne's manner was serious; he himself felt still far from robust; he had on him the terror of that which Leyborne had hinted; and the memory of his waking was vivid and horrible. Perhaps, too, there may have been, somewhere in his mind, an unacknowledged feeling that he was making a mess of it, that he was capable of better things than he had recently known.

"I shall be infernally bored," he said. "Milkin"



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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cows ain't a bit in my line. Wouldn't a week-end do? This is Friday, isn't it?"

"I tell you what," said Leyborne suddenly. "I'll come, too. I've not been there this summer yet. I've no very pressing cases at present. Yes"—he affected to consult a blank engagement-book on the desk—"I can leave everything in MacGrudder's hands. I'll come to look after you, and prevent you from hanging yourself on all the trees in Great Beeches, one after another, as your only amusement. You play picquet?"

"It's a bit above my mark," said Bouverie. "I'm better at nap."

"I'll teach you," said Leyborne. "Is it fixed?"

"I suppose so," said Bouverie cheerlessly. "I don't want to get 'em. Yes, I'll do it. Leyborne, old friend," he went on, "I wouldn't have taken what you've said to me from another livin' soul. But you've been uncommon decent to me, and I'll swallow your pill. I won't get 'em if I come down, will I?"

"You will not," said Leyborne.

"You swear that?"

"I swear it."

"Then," said Bouverie, "when do we start?"

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## MR. BOUVERIE ACTS ON ADVICE

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"The train," said Leyborne, "leaves at 10.2. We can do it easily. It's not nine yet. I'll throw some things into a bag, and if you'll telephone for a taxi we can rush round to Charing Cross Road and collect some stuff for you and catch the train on our heads. We'll want nothing but flannels, big boots, and golf-clubs. Ring up 1547 Kennington. I'll wire Mrs. Tichborne to get our rooms ready as we drive to Waterloo."

He left the room as Bouverie unhooked the receiver.

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## CHAPTER II

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### Mr. Tremayne Does a Deal

**C**LOSE upon the hour of ten that same morning an old gentleman was crossing Waterloo Bridge in an omnibus. From the facts that he removed his silk hat to mop his bald skull twice and consulted his watch three times during the transit, an intelligent observer would have diagnosed that he was troubled with heat and anxiety about a train. A pale old gentleman, this. Though he perspired freely, his colour was no deeper than a delicate rose pink. His cranium somewhat resembled a sugar loaf and its drooping lines were followed in his eyebrows, which, raised high just above his thin nose, fell away rapidly from that point almost to the corners of his watery blue eyes. From his nose, in harmony with the general scheme on which he was built, two deep lines were drawn far below the mouth. His upper lip was short and displayed two large teeth which closed over the

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## MR. TREMAYNE DOES A DEAL

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lower lip. The chin was unnoticeable. Below all this, a scanty growth of fair, silky whisker lent the last touch of ineffectiveness to this picture of depression. He wore a baggy frock coat of expensive material. In the left lapel was a bit of blue ribbon. Our intelligent observer would have looked confidently for elastic-sided boots; nor would he have been disappointed.

No sooner did the omnibus reach the railway bridge which spans Waterloo Bridge Road than this old, pathetic gentleman got up, and straining a flat, brown-paper package to his bosom with one hand, with the other, which was already burdened with an umbrella and the current copy of the *Baptist*, grabbed at a strap above his head. The 'bus swayed, the old gentleman staggered, and, treading heavily on the foot of a violent-looking man by the door, was projected into the arms of the conductor. The brown-paper package shot from his grasp and lit on the pavement. The string broke and a mass of papers burst forth.

Mr. Wilberforce Wildbore (for this was his name), regardless of the abuse of the violent-looking man, uttered a lamentable cry, and,

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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springing from the step of the omnibus, fell on his knees above the disordered documents and strove to compress them once more within the brown paper. The task which he essayed is at any time an exasperating one. His hurry, the blasphemy of the violent-looking man and the jocular advice of the half-dozen idlers who instantly surrounded him, rendered it, on this occasion, hideous. For a few seconds he tried to restore the papers to something approaching neatness, but his trembling hands refused to perform their office, and after a brief, foolish contest, he gathered everything pell-mell into a chaotic mass against his waistcoat and rose carefully to his feet.

Then the papers began to slip.

Mr. Wildbore, as he stood there, unable to move hand or foot lest the catastrophe which he dared not precipitate should occur, acutely aware that the hands of the clock were racing towards the hour fixed for the departure of his train, and casting piteous eyes round him for help, presented an appearance so desperate that a dealer in portmanteaux, whose shop was situated just across the pavement, saw in him a certain cus-

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## MR. TREMAYNE DOES A DEAL

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toomer. Taking in his hand a small, yellow leather kit-bag, this astute merchant stepped in front of Mr. Wildbore and invitingly opened the square mouth of his commodity.

"I can do you this, sir," he said in a husky but insinuating voice, "at three and four-three. Usual price five and six. Sale, sir. Great redacs." He pointed to a sign which ran the full length of his shop-front and read "Bags. Bags. Bags. Last days of Tremayne's Sale. Unparalleled bargains."

"I'll take it," gasped Mr. Wildbore, allowing the papers to slide into the welcome receptacle. Then he handed two half-crowns to the bag-dealer, snatched the bag and, fleeing across the road, vanished at his best pace up the slope which leads to the Main Line departure platform. His energy was rewarded. The train was just beginning to move. Mr. Wildbore hurled himself at a first-class compartment, into which, regardless of the menacing shouts of three ticket-inspectors and five porters, he succeeded in penetrating. There was but one other occupant of the carriage, a gentleman in tweeds, who smoked

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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a cigar and conned the pages of Bradshaw with the greatest apparent interest.

I may observe here that though Mr. Wildbore used omnibuses, he was in his right class in the train. A gentleman of easy fortune, he saw no reason to deny himself the comfort of first-class travelling, though his timidities rendered him averse from making use of motor-cabs and tube railways.

Mr. Wildbore, after the first fierce excitement attendant upon the catching of trains by so narrow a margin had subsided, became aware of the obnoxious odour of tobacco. From a glance at the window he learned that he, not the gentleman in tweeds, was at fault. The legend

## 2WOKING

which there met his gaze told him that any objection that he might lodge would be treated, in all probability, with contempt. There was nothing for it but to endure, until he should find an opportunity of changing carriages.

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## MR. TREMAYNE DOES A DEAL

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"Can you tell me, sir," he asked, "which is our first stop?"

"Salisbury," said the other.

"Salisbury?" cried Mr. Wildbore. "Did you say Salisbury, sir?"

"This is the ten o'clock express for Plymouth," replied the gentleman in tweeds, as if that settled the question. He relapsed into his study of Bradshaw.

Mr. Wildbore faded to complete whiteness. That he was shut up in a smoking-carriage for some hours was nothing; but that he should be in the wrong train was everything. What would Clarinda say? She expected him at Mulberry Farm with her papers by one o'clock. Not that an hour or two could make much difference to her. The meeting wasn't till the evening. But it was the principle of the thing. She had told him to catch the 10.2 train for Berwick Charity. He had caught, instead, the ten o'clock express for Plymouth. And Clarinda did not approve of the plans which she made for his guidance being abandoned. He could hear her. "Were you capable of looking after yourself, I would say nothing. But when you deliberately neglect



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my advice, which you know is for your good, in favour of your own wilful and headstrong courses, I can only surmise that my efforts on your behalf are not desired, are not appreciated. Gratitude I no longer look for in this world, but the common politeness due from a man to a woman (though, to be sure, I am only your wife) would, I should have thought, suggest some attempt to do what I ask you. But what do you care for my anxiety—not to mention my inconvenience—for Isabel's anxiety?" And more in the same strain.

"You're sure," he said to the gentleman in tweeds, "that we do not stop at Basingstoke?"

"Salisbury," said the other in a decided tone of voice, "is our first stop. The train you wanted goes out two minutes later than this one, and from the other side of the same platform."

"I see," said Mr. Wildbore. "Yes, that must be what has happened."

"It is," said the other.

Mr. Wildbore was silent. "Forgive me," he said presently, "but I should be most grateful if you will lend me your railway-guide for a moment."

"What do you want to know?" asked the other

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## MR. TREMAYNE DOES A DEAL

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fiercely, glaring at him over the Bradshaw. "Do you suggest that I am mistaken?"

"Not for worlds," cried Mr. Wildbore. "But—you know—Bradshaw is so difficult. It is so easy to overlook——"

"You *do* suggest that I am mistaken," said the other. "Let me tell you, sir, that I am never mistaken about a train. I have devoted twenty years to the study of this work"—he waved the Bradshaw—"and, if I tried, I could not make an error about the stops of the Plymouth Express. I could as soon go wrong in the alphabet."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," said Mr. Wildbore. "I have no doubt you are right. Then you are quite sure that you see no stop between Waterloo and——"

"That I *see?*" cried the gentleman in tweeds. "Do you suppose that I am studying *this* wretched train? My good sir, they haven't done a thing to it since 1900. It is wholly devoid of interest. I am engaged, if you wish to know, in rubbing up my Kerry locals."

"Well," said Mr. Wildbore, "it is very important for me to be at Berwick Charity as early as possible. I'm afraid it will be a very awkward

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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journey from Salisbury. *May* I borrow your guide?"

The face of the gentleman in tweeds lighted up with pleasure.

"My dear sir," he said, "why should you trouble, when I can give you all the information you want? Let me see," he went on, laying the Bradshaw on the seat that the miracle which he was about to perform might lose nothing in force. "We reach Salisbury at 12.20. Once there, several courses are open to us. We may, for example, return to Basingstoke by the 1.15 slow, arriving there at 2.36. This will entail a wait of one hour and forty-one minutes, when we shall catch the 4.17 to Southampton West, where we again change to take the slow 5.2 down, which reaches Berwick Charity at 5.31. Or we may take the Romsey line train from Salisbury at 1.6. (Have you seen the Cathedral? This will give you just time, if you take a fly.) At Romsey, which we reach at 2.57, we have an hour and two minutes. (The Abbey is well worth a visit.) At 3.59 we get on to Redbridge, where we again meet the 5.2 from Southampton West. Between these two routes there is but one choice: the

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## MR. TREMAYNE DOES A DEAL

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second. It passes through some of the most charming scenery in England and affords you an opportunity of studying two most interesting churches. Or we may travel by the Avon Valley line, by the 12.27, through Fordingbridge to Moors, where we change. There we catch a very slow local at 4.8 to Ringwood, and changing again, push on by the 5.19 to Brockenhurst, and thence by the 7.1 up to Berwick Charity, arriving 7.28. On the whole, everything points to the second route. I'm afraid you cannot reach Berwick before 5.31."

He leant back in his seat and attacked his Kerry locals with renewed appetite.

"And I was to have been home by one," groaned Mr. Wildbore.

"You can, of course, take a special," said the gentleman in tweeds.

"Clarinda," said Mr. Wildbore, "would never countenance the expense. Never."

"I have it," said the gentleman in tweeds. "I absolutely have it. Are you anything of a walker?"

"I am good," said Mr. Wildbore, "for several miles. Say three."

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Then," said the other, "do this. Take the 12.27 reaching Fordingbridge at one precisely. Get out there and walk to your destination across the Forest. How does that strike you?"

"Is it very far?" asked Mr. Wildbore, thinking of his burden and his elastic-sided boots.

"Great Beeches from Fordingbridge? Oh dear, no. A mile or two. Forty-five minutes walk at the outside. You will reach home by two o'clock at the latest."

"That is a fine suggestion," said Mr. Wildbore gratefully. "I'll do that."

He opened his bag and began to restore order among his wife's scattered papers. For some minutes he occupied himself thus, happily enough. But soon a vague disquiet began to possess him. His brows became puckered with care. He ceased to sort and began to search. Sheet after sheet, bundle after bundle, he picked up, examined, and laid aside. His anxiety became greater as the suspicion of loss grew to apprehension and apprehension approached certainty. After twice going through the entire contents of the parcel the perspiration was flowing freely down his face. At last he could doubt no longer.

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## MR. TREMAYNE DOES A DEAL

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"It's gone," he said with a groan.

"What is gone?" asked the Bradshaw expert civilly.

"A speech, sir. A speech of my wife's. It must have fallen out in the street. She was to make it this evening at Berwick Abbas. A speech on Temperance, sir, from the medical standpoint. A most convincing address, crowded with scientific terms, entitled 'Deadly Poison,' sir. I have heard it a score of times and on every occasion it has presented fresh food for my thought. This, sir, is an irreparable loss to The Cause."

"But," said the other, "it is not lost. Your wife can write it again."

"Alas, no," said Mr. Wildbore. "Her assistant in its preparation—I admit, a most able young fellow, though I was disappointed in him—is no longer—ah, available. A medical man, sir."

"Ah," said his fellow passenger cheerily, "dead, eh?"

"No," said Mr. Wildbore in a voice which banished the able young assistant-author of "Deadly Poison" from the discussion. For the third time he passed in review his bundle of papers. "It was among these," he said, "when I

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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started this morning. I looked particularly, though it was unnecessary. She told me it was there and it was. My wife, sir, is like yourself, never mistaken. Still, I thought it best to make sure. Oh! I am well served for doubting her correctness—for this is the result. The parcel was firmly tied when I opened it. My wife's knots never slip. But that with which I retied it cannot have been firm. A firm knot, sir, is very difficult to accomplish. To myself, at least. I have never been able to master the knack. So the bundle fell apart, the papers were scattered, and in my hurry I must have omitted to pick up the very one which she had specially commissioned me to bring with me from town. Yes. I am well served."

He went on muttering to himself, for the gentleman in tweeds had lost interest in his troubles and was now bringing himself up to date in the matter of an obscure light-railway in Kinross-shire.

The country fled past the windows of the carriage, and long before Mr. Wildbore had exhausted his flow of self-condemnation, they

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## MR. TREMAYNE DOES A DEAL

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plunged into the tunnel which marks the approach to Salisbury Station.

"Here," said the gentleman in tweeds, as they emerged, "you get out. Your train leaves in seven minutes, and from No. 3 platform. Good-bye. Remember—Fordingbridge and a short walk."



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### CHAPTER III

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#### Mr. Strongi'th'arm Is Warned Off the Course

**M**R. STRONGI'TH'ARM, ma'am," said Mrs. Tichborne.

"Dear, dear," said Mrs. Wildbore. "That young man," she reflected, "can have no possible excuse for calling again and at this time of the morning. It is Isabel."

"Says he won't keep you a moment, ma'am, as the fly's waiting. It's about the meeting, ma'am."

Mrs. Wildbore descended, rustling. The vagaries of fashion she regarded with the indifference of a woman whose mental gifts are great while her bodily perfections are inconsiderable; but she always insisted on rustling. A woman who rustled, she held, may not always be in the latest mode, but no one can doubt that she is well dressed. To achieve this object, she affected much black silk. Whatever she had affected, it may be said

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## MR. STRONGI' TH' ARM IS WARNED OFF

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in parenthesis, there must have been much of it, for there was a vast deal of Mrs. Wildbore.

But let us not labour a description of this excellent woman.

Everybody knows Mrs. Wildbore. For twenty years her name has been inseparably connected in the public mind with every cause that makes for the Sweetening of Life and the Regeneration of Humanity. Nonconformity, that vast force which has been rightly, if confusedly, described as "the backbone of English thought," counts in her one of its sturdiest champions. Not that she is a bigoted Dissenter. No. Whatever her views may be on the interdependence of Church and State, she is always ready to admit that the Anglicans number in their body some worthy and even able men; and she is quite prepared to join hands with the English Church in pursuing any joint attack upon the common foe. Her cousin, the Vicar of Chorlton-cum-Foswick, has frequently addressed the Temperance Society of Queen's Square Chapel, Bayswater, of which she is Honorary Vice-President, and she herself has been known to appear on the platform at the Vicar's own quarterly tea-meetings. But her activities

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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are not confined to the promotion of Total Abstinence.

It is owing to Mrs. Wildbore's efforts that the Zenanas of many unfortunate Indian gentlemen have learned the meaning of discontent, the first step towards freedom. Her name is a household word among dozens of West African negroes, who to-day go about the bush in the discomfort of red flannel, calling down blessings on her head. Among the "sunny-hearted children of the far Pacific Isles" it is as familiar as that of the late Queen Victoria, and oh, how much more beloved! Her tract against tobacco has been devoured by her dusky brothers in fourteen different dialects of Polynesia. She is President of—

The British League of Ornithophiles, whose object is to wipe away from our native millinery the horrid stain of bird-slaughter.

The Free Figure Federation, who wage their war against the corset in all its forms.

The Sensible Shoe Society, whose name speaks for itself.

The Society for the Abatement of the Smoke-nuisance in Public Places.

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## MR. STRONGI'TH'ARM IS WARNED OFF

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The Society for the Abolition of Ice-cream Shops.

The Society for the Prevention of Ball-room Dancing.

The Society for the Purification of Public Amusement, with special reference to Bare Feet and Legs.

The Society for the Regulation of Poster Advertisements.

The Society for the Promotion of Humane Food.

The Society for the Silencing of Church Bells in Cities.

The Society for the Destruction of the Turf (which is not a golf club).

The Anti-force League—in which capacity she has attended all but one Hague Convention.

The Society for the Suppression of Band Music and the Closing of Museums and Picture Galleries on Sundays.

The British Branch of the World's Women's Anti-jewellery League (of which she despairs).

The Metropolitan Association for the extinction of Foot-binding in China.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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The National Society for the Protection of the Tame Pheasant and the Carted Deer.

The High-neck Society (with which is incorporated the League for the Promotion of Womanly Modesty).

The Federation of British Esperantists (Bayswater Branch).

The Society for the Suppression of Tip-cat, and other Games Dangerous to Pedestrians.

The societies of which she is Vice-President are as the sands of the sea.

The number of committees on which she sits is infinite.

In the art of teaching other people their business she has no peer.

She is a woman worthy of the name.

Mrs. Wildbore, then, without a single backward glance at the mirror, left her bedroom and went down into the hall. Through the open door she saw the fly which was to take her daughter and herself to the station. In the porch stood Isabel, exchanging small talk with a callow but enormous curate who leaned on a bicycle and gazed adoringly into her face with large, brown, dog-like eyes. The rustling of Mrs. Wildbore

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## MR. STRONGI'TH'ARM IS WARNED OFF

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caused him to abandon this occupation and assure himself that the treadle of his machine was in proper working order.

Mrs. Wildbore was not pleased. Mr. Strongi'th'arm no doubt was an excellent young man. His zeal for Temperance was, for a Churchman, remarkable. He was sound on tobacco. His views on Ball-room Dancing and Foot-binding in China were irreproachable. In fact, there was no cause which she had at heart for which he had not, in the course of the last three weeks, expressed his unbounded admiration. But she had other views for Isabel. Nothing definite, you understand. The girl was very young. But there was no place in her daughter's future for a penniless curate of the Church of England.

"As I was passing," said Mr. Strongi'th'arm (for so excellent a young man with extreme mendacity), "I just looked in to see that you quite understood about the time of our meeting to-night."

"It is at seven, I believe," said Mrs. Wildbore, "in the village schoolroom."

"Yes," said the curate, "that is right."

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"I think you saw me make a note of it on Wednesday afternoon," said Mrs. Wildbore.

"I did, I did," replied Mr. Strongi'th'arm, while he rang his bell for no conceivable reason. "But memoranda may become mislaid, and as I was passing——"

"I am very much obliged to you," said Mrs. Wildbore, "but we must be off. We are going into Southampton to inspect the Lascars' Home."

"Indeed?" said the youth. "Indeed?" He felt the tyre of his front wheel. "I have never seen it."

"Isabel, get my umbrella," said Mrs. Wildbore.

"I am ashamed to say," Mr. Strongi'th'arm continued, as he prodded the tyre of his back wheel, "that I have been here over two months and have never visited the Lascars' Home."

"Thank you, Isabel."

"It is an institution that everybody ought to see." He shot at her the pleading glance of a Gordon setter whose master is gnawing a grouse's leg.

"Ah, well!" said Mrs. Wildbore, as she climbed into the fly, "you will have plenty of opportunities. But I fear we shall not. So we must wish

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## MR. STRONGI'TH'ARM IS WARNED OFF

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you good-bye for the present. At seven this evening, then—in the schoolroom.”

“Have you decided on the subject of your address yet?” he asked, dropping his bicycle and laying both his hands on the mudguard of the fly as if he would arrest its departure.

“As I told you yesterday, I propose to speak on Alcohol from the Medical Standpoint. The speech which I shall give is the same which I made last winter at Lahore and Delhi and to the Gond Mission at Mouree. Good-bye, Mr. Strongi'th'arm.”

“I can promise you an enthusiastic reception,” he said. “The Clarinda Wildbore Tent will be present and all the best women for miles around.”

“So you have told me, Mr. Strongi'th'arm. At seven, then.”

“In the schoolroom.”

“In the schoolroom, Mr. Strongi'th'arm. Driver, go on.”

The curate was left alone with his bicycle.

“At any rate,” he reflected, “I shall see her this evening.” He looked at his watch. “Ten fifteen,” he said gloomily, as he picked up the



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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bicycle with a vicious tug, "nearly nine hours." But Mr. Wildbore had no cause for jealousy.

"That young man," said Mrs. Wildbore in the fly, "is becoming a nuisance."

"Yes, mamma," said Isabel, casting down her eyes. "But he is very anxious to make a success of his meeting."

Mrs. Wildbore regarded her daughter out of the corner of her eye.

"I think, Isabel," she said, "that you had better not go to the meeting."

"Really, mamma?" cried Isabel in genuine and pleased surprise. She had never been let off a meeting in her life on any pretext short of actual illness. "Why?"

"It would be kinder to that curate. He is getting foolish about you. I hope," she went on sternly, "that there has been no encouragement——"

"Oh, no, mamma!" said Isabel. "But I'm afraid they don't always need encouragement."

"He has never——"

"Oh, no, mamma! He has always been most uninteresting."

"That is hardly the right spirit in which to

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## MR. STRONGI'TH'ARM IS WARNED OFF

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regard so serious a matter," said her mother. "Young men will be silly, but at the time it means a great deal to them, and they are often very unhappy. I have suspected Mr. Strongi'th'arm for the last week, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt, for he is an ardent abstainer. But when it comes to his calling here three times in twenty-four hours to remind me of the time of his meeting, which I have noted in my diary under his eyes, and its place, when there is only one possible place, the schoolroom, I can doubt no longer. He is going to make a fool of himself, and you had better suppress him."

"Yes, mamma."

"You are a good girl, Isabel. I have no anxiety about you."

"No, mamma."

"It is a great comfort to me," said Mrs. Wildbore, "to have a daughter who inherits something of my own commonsense. I can trust you, Isabel."

"Yes, mamma."

"Were it not so, how could I devote so much time to my Causes. A woman's first duty is, I conceive, to her family, to her own child. Were

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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you a flighty girl, do you think I could have gone to India last winter? Could I have left a feather-brained daughter with no one but your father to look after her? The confidence which I have in you counts for a great deal in my work. You may not be able to do much actively, but by leaving my mind tranquil you do your share. And that is more than a little."

"I am so glad, mamma," said Isabel.

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## CHAPTER IV

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### Afflictions of an Elderly Gentleman

**N**O doubt the gentleman in tweeds was incapable of error where the departure, arrival and connection of railway trains were concerned. But the disadvantage of his peculiar class of knowledge is this. In acquiring it, a man is apt to become impressed with the belief that the Earth consists solely of portions of permanent way, more or less intelligently joined together. He learns to ignore completely those considerable stretches of country across which no line is laid. His ideas of time, too, are distorted. He knows to a tick how long it takes him to get from one station to another in the train, and in his imaginary journeys he seldom travels at less than twenty-five miles an hour. He becomes, then, an untrustworthy guide to distances and times on the high road. In half an hour, for instance, he is accustomed to cover anything from ten to thirty miles. And if you ask

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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him how long it will take you to walk between two lines of railway which he knows to be ten miles apart, he will, making every allowance for the pedestrian's slow rate of progress, answer readily enough, "Oh, about twenty minutes."

It is only fair to the gentleman in tweeds to remind the reader that his estimate of three-quarters of an hour for crossing the New Forest on foot was, for one of his kind, liberal in the extreme. But it was not nearly liberal enough, as Mr. Wildbore found. The old gentleman knew little or nothing of the Forest. He had driven in it and walked in it and had a well-founded idea that it was a considerable place. But he had no knowledge of its railway system (the worst, thank Heaven! in England), and when he set out from Fordingbridge Station he would have been surprised—so great was his faith in the gentleman in tweeds—to learn that he had a walk of some eleven miles before him. But as he did not ask, he was spared this distressing knowledge, and he footed it resolutely along what he understood to be the road for Berwick Charity, rejoicing in the beauty of the country and almost congratulating himself on the fortunate

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## AFFLICTIONS OF A GENTLEMAN

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mischance which had enabled him to see it. Already he began to think himself near his destination. He had met nobody for an hour, and when at last he saw the figure of a man coming towards him he took the opportunity of assuring himself that he was on the right path.

"My man," he said, "can you tell me how far it is to Berwick Charity Station?"

The forester halted and regarded this old gentleman who, with a yellow kit-bag in his hand and garbed in the conventional silk hat and frock coat of civilization, dared these solitudes. He scratched his head and reflected.

"Close by, eh?" asked Mr. Wildbore.

"That 'pen's," said the other slowly, "on what 'ee call close."

"Say a mile," said Mr. Wildbore, putting it, as he thought, at the highest possible figure.

"Say thirteen," replied the man, and, caught by a faint flavour of repartee in his words, grinned doubtfully. "Ah!" he said, "batter say thirteen." This time he felt sure that he had come out with a good thing, and throwing caution to the winds, laughed twice hoarsely.

"Thirteen?" cried Mr. Wildbore aghast.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"You must be mistaken." It was impossible for him to abandon his belief in the gentleman in tweeds without a struggle.

"Thirdeen it be," said the man rudely. "The path 'ee's travellin'," he added with obvious pleasure, "it be nigher twanty."

"Then," said Mr. Wildbore, his wits sharpened by adversity, "I'm on the wrong road?"

"Ah!" said the other, and would have passed on.

Mr. Wildbore's heart sank into his thin elastic-sided boots, which were already causing him some discomfort. But thirteen or thirty, he was in for it. Clarinda was waiting for her speech.

"Is there anywhere near, where I could get a conveyance?" he asked.

"A wot?" asked the man.

"A trap, a carriage, something to drive me."

"Naw," said the fellow, "there b'ain't."

"Then," said Mr. Wildbore, his reasoning growing clearer every second, "I must walk."

"Ah!" said the other. "Say thirdeen mile."

"Which is the way?" asked Mr. Wildbore.

"Do 'ee see thate air clump, then, on thicky hill, then?" said the man. "Make for un, and

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## AFFLICTIONS OF A GENTLEMAN

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ee'll find a brook a bit way south'ard of he. Foller he till 'ee come by a big 'ornbeam. Parss he on yer right, an' do 'ee take a gorzey ride, then, till 'ee come to a 'oller. Cross he and through a beachey corpse till 'ee do find a farm, an' I rackon 'ee'd best ax thay-er. But if 'ee misses farm, keep sun on yer right cheek an' 'ee cahn't stray terrible fur. Say thirdeen," he repeated inconsequently and, with another hideous guffaw, proceeded on his way.

And now, behold Mr. Wildbore involved in the intricacies of the New Forest! I deny myself the pleasure of giving a minute account of his wanderings, though, in the course of them, he passed through scenery unrivalled in England. Those glades and heaths, those hills and dales, where he stumbled, footsore and sweating, presented countless landscapes which I would gladly draw. I am perhaps at my best in this manner. But it were heartless for us to revel in blue distances and massed foliage which Mr. Wildbore viewed, as they continued to dawn upon his vision, with less and less favour. Soon he lost all sense of their beauty, as of distance and time. Hun-



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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ger, thirst, and weariness filled him to the exclusion of everything else.

He had plunged ankle deep into several bogs. His hands were lacerated by the thorns and briars of the wilderness. He had melted his decent collar into shapelessness, and he had kept the sun on his right cheek with such scrupulous care that it had become violently inflamed. He was faint with hunger and fatigue.

Twice he had used a regrettable expression.

In this condition, he emerged, towards three o'clock, upon a little green dell. Here, over a grassy lawn a rivulet tinkled. The place was cool; great trees stood all about it and the ground, sloping everywhere to the water, formed a hollow into which the sun shone for but a few hours in the day.

The acrid scent and the crackling of burning wood drew his attention to the upper end of this oasis. There, a rude hut, formed of wattles and clay, stood on the very edge of the trees, just beyond the vivid green circle that marked the bubbling of the spring. By the door, seated on the ground, a large, elderly rustic fed his fire

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## AFFLICTIONS OF A GENTLEMAN

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with little sticks. On a tripod, over the flame, there hung an iron pot.

As far as this charming picture affected Mr. Wildbore there was but one object in it. Fixing his eyes on the pot, he staggered towards it.

The elderly rustic was the dirtiest old man that has ever been seen. His clothes had once been corduroy, but as the original stuff had rotted away it had been replaced by patches until the man looked like a crazy quilt. The only things about him that approached the homogeneous were his leather gaiters and his greasy cap made from the pelt of a pole-cat. These gaiters and this cap were ornamented with long fringes of a material which Mr. Wildbore could not recognise. His face was blackened with exposure and incrustations, and his little eyes peered cunningly out from under a screen of uncombed iron-grey hair.

In spite of his forbidding looks he proved to be an amiable creature. He made Mr. Wildbore free of his establishment, fed him on lumps of something, possibly meat, which he fished from the cauldron with his fingers (Mr. Wildbore didn't care) and laid on a tin plate which had not been cleaned for forty years (Mr. Wildbore

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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would have tolerated gladly the deposits of half a century). He told Mr. Wildbore that Berwick Charity was hard by. Not more than three miles, he said.

By this time, however, Mr. Wildbore's apprehensions for his wife's anxiety were no longer clamorous. He had gone through so much this afternoon that the thought of her displeasure, both at the lateness of his arrival and the loss of her speech, was as nothing. He ate and drank and took off his boots and behaved in a thoroughly reckless way. Such good friends did he and his host become that the elderly rustic at last said——

"Rackon 'ee'd like ter see someut as I gat ee-er."

Mr. Wildbore expressed his eagerness to do so.

"A varry uncommon creetur her be," said the other, as he thrust his hand into his coat pocket and produced a linen bag, in which something moved softly. He opened the bag and shook out on to his knees a serpent about eighteen inches long, in colour a dirty, pinky white.

Mr. Wildbore recoiled.

"Blaz 'ee," said the elderly rustic as he fondled

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## AFFLICTIONS OF A GENTLEMAN

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the horror in his lap, "'e do no 'arm, 'e doan't. Bain't 'e a beauty, then?"

"A most beautiful animal, indeed," said Mr. Wildbore, cloaking his thoughts in the first words which came to him.

"A blind-'orm an' a wite un," said the old man proudly. "'Tis a ra-er curiozity, sure."

"A most interesting, rare and curious specimen," said Mr. Wildbore, as he began to pull on his elastic-sided boots.

"Never seed the like of he but once," said the old man, "an' wot I dunno 'bout sarpints b'ain't worth knawin'. It be my perfession," he added. "See my cap, then," he said, and drew Mr. Wildbore's attention to its fringe. "Adders," he said, "adders' tayuls. I be Snaky Jake," he concluded with simple pride.

"A most useful and, ah! uncommon occupation," said Mr. Wildbore. He rose to his feet. "My friend," he said, "I must be pushing on. You have been most kind."

"Don't 'ee go, then," said the old man. "Look at this pre'y lil varmint, do 'ee now. Declayer!" he cried, as the snake raised its head and hissed lightly at Mr. Wildbore, "if 'e b'ain't gone and

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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took quite a fancy to 'ee, then! Would 'ee like un?" he asked suddenly.

"I couldn't think of robbing you," cried Mr. Wildbore.

"If it come to tha'at," replied Snaky Jake, "a sovereign'd buy un."

"I must be going," said Mr. Wildbore.

"I wouldn't part with he," said Snaky Jake, "to any other gen'leman, but 'ee shall 'ave un for ten shillin'."

"But I don't want it," cried Mr. Wildbore. "I have no liking for pets. My wife does not permit—does not care for creatures in the house."

"Rackon her'd like he, though," said Snaky Jake. "See the pre'y boy. Five shillin's not axin' too much—*be* it now?"

"My good man," said Mr. Wildbore, "understand me. I will not have the thing."

"Nice kind of gen'leman 'ee be," cried Snaky Jake truculently. "Glad 'nough ter swaller all a pore man's meat an' won't gi' five shillin' for the like o' thate air." He held out the reptile on his enormous palm, where it writhed feebly. He rose to his feet and towered over Mr. Wild-

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## AFFLICTIONS OF A GENTLEMAN

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bore. "Thayer be some," he said between his teeth, "as 'ud lose their tampers with 'ee."

Remember Mr. Wildbore's age,<sup>1</sup> present exhausted condition and timid nature. Remember that he was quite alone with this powerful veteran.

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Snaky Jake pocketed the five shillings and, resuming his blandest manner, enquired, "Wayer shall us put he fer 'ee, then?" He laid hold of Mr. Wildbore's bag and opened it. "The varry thing!" he cried, and dropped the snake in among the papers.

"I will not," cried Mr. Wildbore, with a burst of spirit.—"I will not have that filthy creature in my bag. It is full of my wife's private documents."

"Well," said Snaky Jake, "rackon 'e won't tell wot 'e learns."

"Take it out," cried Wildbore stoutly.

"Take un out yerseluf," replied Snaky Jake. "Haw! Haw!" and he clicked the bag and handed it to its furious owner. "I'd warn 'ee," he said

<sup>1</sup>Did I ever mention it? It was fifty-eight.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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with a sudden malicious thought, "ter mind 'ow 'ee opens he. If my lil boy gets 'is tooth inter 'ee, my Gor! it be worl'-without-end-amen for 'ee, sure."

"Why!" cried Mr. Wildbore. "You said it was harmless."

"Won' 'arm Snaky Jake," said the other. "But do 'ee keep out of 'is way, is wot *I* say, master. He be tarrible quick on 'is spring, mind. An' now," he concluded, "'ee'd best be movin'. Thayer be yer road, master."

With rage and terror in his heart Mr. Wildbore picked up his bag and set off in the direction indicated by Snaky Jake's dirty finger.

"When I get home," he thought, "I will have this bag baked at once. Baked. At once."

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## CHAPTER V

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### Mr. Tremayne Does Another Deal

**T**HE front door of Mr. Leyborne's house in Cranley Crescent, Kennington, was rendered illustrious above its neighbours by a brass plate which, by day, told an incurious world that its owner was a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. By night a red gas lamp in the little front garden became, according to the sentiments of the passer-by, a Beacon of Hope or a Danger Signal. Nothing that a self-respecting physician may do to attract custom had been neglected, but Mr. Leyborne's practice remained, three weeks after he had entered into possession of his house, a wholly negligible quantity.

A complete lack of occupation is not without its compensations. Though it may cause a man to starve, it leaves him at any rate with his hands untied. It gives him plenty of leisure. It enables him to take a little vacation now and then, with-



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out the intrusion upon his enjoyment of the thought that his business is going to the devil.

If Mr. Leyborne had had any patients he could not, at a moment's notice, have left London for an indefinite period in the company of Mr. Bouverie. I have no doubt that you have thought Mr. Leyborne a singularly self-sacrificing young man. "How!" you may have cried. "Here is a rising doctor who, without a thought for his own prospects and influenced solely by a humane desire to assist a dipsomaniac with whom he has little more than an acquaintance, flings his practice to the winds and embarks upon what cannot on the face of it be an agreeable period of idleness."

What I have said of his practice will have modified your opinion of Mr. Leyborne. I now proceed mercilessly to strip away from him the pretence of humanity.

Mr. Leyborne argued thus: "Here is a wealthy lad who shows every sign of possessing an over-large fondness for liquor. Let me, in the name of friendship, take him in hand—however tedious the task. Who knows? I may cure him. Then it will be strange if common gratitude does not

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## TREMAYNE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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suggest to even his enfeebled mind something in the nature of a substantial reward. I am wasting my time here. It's worth a shot, anyhow."

Mr. Leyborne, you see, was on the make like the rest of us.

For the programme which the doctor had sketched there proved to be just sufficient time. Leyborne's simple preparations were complete before the taxi-cab had drawn up at his door. Bouverie's packing, however, was a more deliberate business, for after his own fashion he was rather a dressy young man—particularly, for instance, about the matching of his socks, ties, and handkerchiefs. But, helped and driven by Leyborne, he had got a couple of large suit cases filled to overflowing, by ten minutes to ten. At five minutes to ten they were in the middle of Waterloo Bridge, and their train was as good as caught.

Suddenly Bouverie squeezed the bulb of the whistle, and "Stop" he shouted to the driver down the speaking tube. "I've no cigarettes," he explained to Leyborne. "Drivah," he called through the tube, "stop arra tobaconist's."

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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He was still not in absolute control of his consonants.

[The cab accordingly drew up at a shop, opposite the Main Line exit gates.

Leyborne, thinking that he himself would be the better of an extra half-pound of Navy Cut, followed his charge into the tobacconist's and made his purchase rapidly. Not so Bouverie. It appeared that of all the twenty thousand and three brands of pestilential Virginia cigarettes on the market, this fastidious youth could only smoke one—how he could manage to do that is his own affair—and of this particular brand the dealer had no examples in stock. Bouverie therefore must go through the shop with a small-tooth comb in search of something which his palate would accept, and this was the work of some minutes.

Leyborne pitched his Navy Cut into the cab and waited impatiently. It was already nearly ten o'clock and the train left in three minutes. Time enough, but not too much. As he stood on the kerb, his eye lit on a long envelope, well filled, lying in the gutter. Turning it over with the point of his cane, he was surprised to observe that it was addressed in a very familiar,

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## TREMAYNE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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ugly handwriting, none other indeed than his own. The inscription ran as follows: "Mrs. Wildbore, 17 Inverness Terrace, W."

Not unnaturally he picked it up and pulled out its contents.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Here's a rummy coincidence. Think of me finding this. Dear old 'Deadly Poison,' by Jove! Wonder how the devil it got here. Well, it was worth five guineas to me, so I expect she'll be glad to have it again. I must keep my eyes skinned for her in case she's in the station. Anyhow I must send it back to her."

He put the thing in the breast pocket of the Norfolk jacket he was wearing and went back into the shop.

"Buck up, Bouverie," he said, "we'll miss that train if you're not sharp."

"Right-o, old boy," said Bouverie. "Just ready—waiting for my change. Little girl gone out for it. Back directly."

"Hang it!" cried Leyborne, "we haven't a minute to spare."

"All right," said Bouverie obstinately. "Don't let me keep you, Leyborne. Off you go. But *I'm*

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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not going to leave this shop until I get my change."

Leyborne swore beneath his breath and composed himself to wait. A minute passed and the little girl came breathlessly back with Bouverie's change. This he counted carefully. Then he gathered to his bosom a loose pile of cigarette tins which stood by his elbow on the counter and prepared to leave the shop.

"You ass!" cried Leyborne, "why didn't you have them made up into a parcel?"

"No time," said Bouverie as he emerged on to the pavement. "No time to wait for that. Only time to wait for change. Hurry up, Leyborne. We're going to miss that . . . oh, Hades!" he cried, for the cigarette tins had escaped his clutches and had, all but one, descended in ruin to the pavement. Leyborne echoed his sentiments.

"I can do you this 'ere beg, sir," said a thick voice in Bouverie's ear, "at five and six. Usual price seven-four-three. Sale, sir. Great reduces."

Bouverie turned to discover Mr. Tremayne at his elbow. The trader in portmanteaux was holding out for his inspection a small yellow kit-bag, its mouth gaping suggestively.

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## TREMAYNE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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"This 'ere," Mr. Tremayne insinuated, "is the cheapest little line in begs that ever was or"—he lowered his voice as became the importance of the information—"ever will be. It's a marvel, sir, that's wot it is. Only five and six, sir."

"You're sure it's a good bag?" asked Bouverie cautiously. Though he had money he made a point of never being done if he knew it.

"I give you me word," said Mr. Tremayne earnestly, "that there's nothing in the trade to come near it. Sold one just the same to an elderly gent not arf a minute ago. ("Ha!" thought Leyborne. "It was the old man, then.") Struck paralytic, 'e was, at the valyer," concluded Mr. Tremayne.

Bouverie, completely satisfied, bundled his boxes into the bag, gave Mr. Tremayne a half-crown, a florin, a sixpenny bit, a threepenny bit, two pennies, and two halfpennies, took the bag and followed Leyborne into the cab.

"Main booking office, like blazes," he called to the driver and slammed the door.

"Are you sure you're bringing enough cigarettes?" asked Leyborne. "It'd be a pity to run

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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short. You've not more than a couple of thousand in that bag, have you?"

"Only five hundred," said Bouverie. "Last me over Sunday, though. Get some more."

"Well," said Leyborne, looking at his watch, "if we catch that train, it's a miracle."

"I don't care," said Bouverie, "how much miracle it is so long's I've got my cigarettes. Wasn't going down into any howling wilderness without a proper supply of cigarettes, not for you or anybody, Leyborne."

Leyborne's foreboding was realized. As they approached, running, the platform at which the 10.2 train stood, it took up its wheels and went away from them.

They both swore.

"Well," said Leyborne to the porter, "when's the next train for Berwick Charity?"

"12.17, sir," said the porter. "Rather slow train though, sir."

"Well," said Leyborne, "if there's nothing for it——"

"I say," cried Bouverie, "I'm not going to hang about in this rotten station for two hours, and *then* go by a slow train. Let's shove our traps

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## TREMAYNE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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in the cloak-room, and go and have a game of pills at The Boys. Then we can have lunch like gentlemen and go down to your blessed Berwick Charity in the afternoon. Isn't there a good train about 3.0, portah?"

"Yes, sir," said the porter. "2.49, sir. Very good train, sir."

"Well then," said Bouverie, "that's good enough for us, Leyborne. If we take that twelve o'clock thing we shall have to eat out of a luncheon basket. Mummied chicken, stale rolls, and claret you can mark linen with. I don't feel I can face up to that sort of lunch, Leyborne. So come along to my club, like a dear fellow. We've got a Stilton there just now that I'd like your opinion of."

"All right," said Leyborne. "I expect that's best." He was not at all averse to lunching at that excellent Bohemian club, The Boys.

The happy suggestions of Mr. Bouverie were followed out, and, in consequence, it was not until after half-past four o'clock that the two friends found themselves upon the platform of Berwick Charity station.



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Put these things in the fly," said Leyborne, after they had collected their baggage.

"The fly, sir," said the porter. "It's gone, sir."

"Didn't Bithyman get my wire?"

"Yes, sir. But very sorry, sir—he was engaged previous by the ladies at Mulberry Farm. Just drove away, they have."

"D'you hear that?" cried Bouverie. "The ladies at Mulberry Farm. Toi hoy! Toi hoy! Young, portah?"

"One of 'em, sir."

"Mother and child," cried Bouverie. "Leyborne, old son, I leave you the mother."

"Been to S'thampton, sir, shoppin', sir," said the communicative porter. "Ordered the fly, sir, before they left, sir. Came in your train and drove off at once."

"This is all very interesting," said Leyborne, "but it doesn't help me a bit. They haven't set up a trap over there yet, I suppose?" he added, nodding at a decent little public-house which stood just across the road from the booking-office.

"No, sir," said the porter, "but Mr. Green, he live up the lane there."

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## TREMAINE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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"I haven't a doubt of it," replied Leyborne, "but what——"

"He 'ave a little thing, sir," said the porter.

"What kind of a little thing?"

"Oh, it ain't very much of a little thing, sir," said the porter apologetically, "but it'll 'old you two gents an' your traps."

"Go and put Mr. Green's little thing into commission at once," said Leyborne.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," said the porter, "can't leave the station, sir. Just up the lane, sir." He touched his cap and passed into the lamp-room.

Leyborne considered Bouverie who sat on a trunk, smoking a cigarette, absorbed in the contemplation of the pearl buttons on his cloth-top boots. He considered the public-house. Then he made up his mind, deliberately, to expose Bouverie to temptation. The sooner he discovered how far the fellow was to be trusted, the better. He had been very good and biddable at lunch and had taken his ginger-beer like a lamb; but how would he act in the absence of his mentor?

"Will you give me your word of honour as a

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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gentleman, Bouverie," he said, "that you won't have a drink over there while I'm gone?"

"My dear old man," cried Bouverie, deeply wounded, "how can you suspect me of any such idea?"

"I didn't," said Leyborne, "but I want your word all the same."

"It's given," said Bouverie. "I s'pose I've no right to resent your suggestion after puttin' myself in your hands, but I think you might show a little conference in me."

"I do," said Leyborne, "by leaving you within reach of a tap. But if you promise——"

"I give you my sacred word of honour," said Bouverie solemnly. "As a gentleman, Leyborne."

"That's good enough for me," replied Leyborne heartily. "Remember, I trust you," and he departed in search of Mr. Green and his little thing.

For some minutes Mr. Bouverie smoked in silence, brooding over the insult to which, by his folly in consenting to be guided by Leyborne, he had laid himself open. At length his wrongs found audible expression.

"Thinks me no better'n a kid," he said to a

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## TREMAYNE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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couple of milk-cans. "Imagines I've no will o' me own. Puts me on my honour as if I was at a girls' school. That's the worst of these doctors. Never have any conference in a fellow. As if I couldn't be trusted to keep off it without givin' my word every time. S'pose he thinks I couldn't go into a bar and not come out tight. I'll show him. Am I to sit swelterin' here all day, and thirsty, too? No, by Gad, I'll walk into that pub and have a lemon squash. He won't object to a lemon squash, I should hope. I'll *prove* to him that I'm to be trusted."

He started to cross the road and halted.

"No," he said, "better take the cigarettes. That porter's got the devil of a fishy eye."

He returned to the platform and picked up his new handbag, and confident that the heavier luggage could look after itself, made his way into the bar of the inn.

"Lemon squash," he said.

"Sorry, sir," replied the pert girl behind the counter, "we've no lemons."

"Milk and soda, then," said Bouverie.

"Sorry, sir," she said, "but the milk's not come yet."

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Very hard to be a teetotaller," muttered Bouverie as he searched his brain for non-alcoholic drinks, his eyes occupied with a series of little china kegs over the girl's head, which bore the words, "Gin," "Whisky," and "Brandy."

"You a teetotaller!" she cried. "Go hon!"

Bouverie flushed with shame. The imputation from those ripe red lips was intolerable.

"Give me," he said distinctly, "a brandy and soda. A large one."

He drank it and felt better.

"Leyborne," he reflected, "is an ass. He only said that about me seein' things to frighten me. And all he said in the train about my bein' unable to resist the cravin' was skittles. I haven't got any cravin'. Shouldn't care if I had. I've a will o' me own, haven't I? Thinks I can't resist temptation, does he? I'll *show* him. Gimme," he said to the barmaid, "a bottle of Three Star." This, when he had paid for it, he stowed away among the cigarettes in his bag. "Now," he continued to himself, "when I show that, unopened, to dear old Leyborne, at the end of our stay down here, and tell him I've had it in my bedroom all the time, he'll have to admit that I'm not the

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## TREMAYNE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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weak-minded slave of the bottle he thinks me." He smiled richly at the prospect of Leyborne's discomfiture. "Gimme another of the same," he said aloud, unthinkingly.

Then a knowledge of what he was doing came to him.

"No," he said. "No. Never mind, Effie." And he turned and marched resolutely out of the bar, bag in hand.

The door of a sitting-room stood open, a cool, pleasant room with a sofa in it and darkened by Virginia creeper which clustered round the window.

Bouverie suddenly realized that he was very sleepy, for the night before had been a hard one. The platform of the station, which he could see through the hall door, appeared to give off heat like a furnace. Without a moment's hesitation he turned into the sitting-room, laid his bag on a chair by the door, his body on the sofa, and dropped into a dreamless sleep.

He was wakened by the sound of voices. Blinking open his eyes, he was aware of an old gentleman who sat in the one armchair and mopped his face freely with a filthy handkerchief.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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By the table stood the young lady of the bar, a white cloth in her hand.

"No," she was saying, "we don't do any post-ing. But the station fly'll be back soon. Come far?" she asked.

"I am exhausted," said the old gentleman. He took a silk hat from the table and passed his handkerchief round inside it. Then he slipped off an elastic-sided boot and a sock, and rubbed the joint of one of his toes tenderly, regarding it with great attention.

The girl whisked a yellow leather kit-bag off the table and laid it on the top of the piano. Then she spread the cloth, set out a cup and saucer and a plate and went away.

"Well, my old buck," said Mr. Bouverie, "you don't make yourself at home, do you? Shall I ring for the chiropodist?"

"Bless me!" ejaculated the old gentleman, "I had no idea that there was any one in the room. My toe, sir, is most painful."

"Been walking some of it off?" asked Bouverie genially.

"Walking? I have been walking all day."

"Well done," said Bouverie. "You seem a

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## TREMAYNE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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bit rotund for that kind of thing. But highly creditable in a man of your age."

"My figure," said the other testily, "is my own affair and my age is none of yours, young man."

"Tuck in your shirt," said Bouverie.

"You don't mean," cried the old gentleman, his hand flying to his waistband, "that my apparel is disordered to that extent? No," he cried, reassured, "there is nothing of the sort. What do you mean, sir?"

"It's only another way of sayin' don't lose your wool, keep your hair on, or don't get stuffy."

"I am wholly at a loss to understand you, sir," said the old gentleman with dignity as he put on his sock.

"What a peppery old boy he is," said Mr. Bouverie, sitting up and beginning to enjoy it.

"Do you suggest, sir, that I am not in control of my temper?"

"That's one way of puttin' it."

"Allow me to tell you," cried Mr. Wildbore, "that I will endure none of your insolence."

"Who kissed the barmaid?" cried Mr. Bouverie. "Oh, you old rascal! I saw you. But,



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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of course, you had no idea there was any one in the room."

This monstrous and—I am sure you will believe me—utterly unfounded charge robbed Mr. Wildbore of the power of speech. He sat frozen in his chair, his mouth open, the elastic-sided boot poised in the air above the foot which awaited it.

"Naughty!" crowed Mr. Bouverie, wagging a finger solemnly at Mr. Wildbore. "Bad old boy! What would the missis say?"

This horrible suggestion restored the use of his muscles to Mr. Wildbore. He drew the boot on, rose slowly to his feet, and said—

"You are an insolent fellow. I decline to share the same room with you another moment. Ah," he cried, looking through the window, as the sound of wheels became audible, "the fly."

"Leyborne!" exclaimed Bouverie in alarm. He started from the sofa and sprang to the window.

Mr. Wildbore picked up the yellow handbag which lay on the chair beside the door and flounced out of the room. Mr. Bouverie turned away from the window with a sigh of relief.

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## TREMAYNE DOES ANOTHER DEAL

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"*Not* Leyborne," he said, and passed his handkerchief over his brow, upon which a few beads of perspiration had started. "Saved!" he remarked, and, taking out his case, lit a cigarette. He heard Mr. Wildbore countermand his tea, hail the fly, and, in a moment, the sound of receding wheels told him that his victim was out of reach.

"Well," he said, "that was a let off and no mistake. Wonder what he'd have said if it *had* been him and he'd caught me in here. Better clear out while there's time, eh? Go and look after the traps, what? Where's my bag? Oh, here it is. Don't remember puttin' it on the piano."

He left the inn with Mr. Wildbore's bag in his hand and, strolling across to the station, resumed his seat on his trunk, smoking contentedly

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## CHAPTER VI

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### Mr. Strongi'th'arm Is Put in His Place

**W**HERE is Mr. Wildbore?" asked Mrs. Wildbore.

"Not come, mum," replied Mrs. Tichborne, as she gave the mountainous woman a hand out of the fly.

"Not come?" cried Mrs. Wildbore. "He *must* have come. Isabel, pay the driver two shillings and a penny for himself. I told him to be here by one o'clock at latest."

"Not a sign of 'im yet, mum."

"You see," said Mrs. Wildbore to her daughter, "what happens if I let your father out of my sight for a moment."

"He is probably coming on by a later train," said Isabel.

"Of course he is coming on by a later train," replied her mother tartly. "That is obvious. The question is, why did he not come by the train which I wrote down for him?"

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## STRONGI' TH' ARM PUT IN HIS PLACE

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"He must have missed it, mamma."

"Of course he has missed it, Isabel, or he would be here. If you can make no more sensible remarks than that, I pray you will not interrupt me."

Mrs. Wildbore was a little tired.

"Again," she went on, "the question is, why did he miss it?"

"It doesn't matter, does it?" said her daughter. "You weren't here if he *had* come by the half-past twelve."

"The fact that I found myself compelled to go into Southampton this morning cannot excuse your father from neglecting my wishes. Suppose I *had* been here? It would have been all the same."

"So it would, mamma," said Isabel, giving up the attempt to shield her unfortunate father. "Perhaps he came by the same train as we did."

"I did not see him at the station, but it may be so. In that case he will not be here for some time, unless he indulges in the extravagance of the fly, which he will meet on its return journey. Tea at once, Mrs. Tichborne. We cannot wait

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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on Mr. Wildbore's convenience. Meanwhile I am without my speech."

"Did you see two gentlemen at the station, mum?" asked Mrs. Tichborne, when she brought in the teapot a few minutes later.

"No," said Mrs. Wildbore. "Why?"

"Because I'm expecting them this evening—Dr. Leyborne and friend."

"Their names," said Mrs. Wildbore, "are of no interest. What is the matter, Isabel?"

"A crumb went down the wrong way, mamma," replied Isabel, who had suddenly grown crimson.

"I have begged you many times to refrain from falling upon your food with that indecent haste. But my wishes have unfortunately no weight with either you or your father. Are these people going to stay here, Mrs. Tichborne?"

"Yes, mum. Dr. Leyborne's an old visitor at Mulberry. A very nice young gentleman, he is."

"I have no doubt of it," said Mrs. Wildbore coldly, "but I hope that we shall not be troubled by noise. Young men are not always pleasant neighbours."

"I dunno about his friend, mum," said Mrs. Tichborne warmly, "but Dr. Leyborne's always

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## STRONGI' TH' ARM PUT IN HIS PLACE

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been very quiet. My 'usband thinks a lot of him."

"Your husband," said Mrs. Wildbore, "and I are not very likely to have many tastes in common. Can you not find quarters for these people somewhere else?"

"I wouldn't disappoint Dr. Leyborne for a bag of sovereigns," said Mrs. Tichborne. "Why, 'e cured my little Ferdy of a boil as big as my fist. Lanced it beautiful and not a penny to pay. 'E's a doctor, mum."

"A medical student!" cried Mrs. Wildbore. "Then he plays the banjo."

"*Not* a student, beggin' your pardon, mum," said the landlady stiffly. "'E's a proper doctor, an M.R.C.V.S. and everything quite regular. 'E never goes nowhere without 'is knives and that. And 'e *don't* play the banjo. 'Tis the concertina. My 'usband an' 'im 'as 'ad some rare evenings with our instrument."

"I beg, then," said Mrs. Wildbore, "that they will confine their music to the back premises. The sound of the concertina is peculiarly grating. I may say that the duration of our visit depends upon their moderation."

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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Mrs. Tichborne left the room to seek her husband in the kitchen and denounce her own folly in consenting to harbour Mrs. Wildbore another night. "If it wasn't that she pays me more a week than I ever 'oped to see," she announced, "I'd give her notice this very minute. 'Ow her 'usband lives with her is more'n I can understand, and Miss Isabel, pore dear young lady, my 'eart aches for 'er, William."

"Drah I some beer, Susan," said Mr. Tichborne "an' quit complainin'. The Lord sends they folks fer ter addify the likes o' you and fer ter provide the likes o' I wi' baacon fer ter greaze my brad wi'."

"Leyborne?" said Mrs. Wildbore in the parlour, reflectively. "And a medical student? Do you think, Isabel, that it can be that young man who wrote—who assisted me in the preparation of my 'Deadly Poison' speech?"

"Leyborne is a common name," said Isabel.

"Leyborne is anything but a common name. Yes—it may be. Strange if it were so. We have seen nothing of that young man since my return from India. An able young man. I have never met with more convincing statistics than those

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## STRONGI'TH'ARM PUT IN HIS PLACE

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he gave me. I have often wondered where he found them. A pity that he was so badly off. On ill terms with his father, I remember. Yes, I should be pleased to meet him again."

"Would you, mamma?" said Isabel. "Really?"

"Why do you say that? I see no reason for my *not* being pleased."

"Oh, mamma——" began Isabel, on a sudden impulse. She broke off.

Her mother raised her eyebrows and regarded her curiously.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Nothing, mamma."

"You have said either too much or too little, Isabel. If I remember aright, Mr. Leyborne *was* without means and *not* on good terms with his father. Is it possible that you have taken any silly ideas into your head about this young man?"

In the adjective Isabel saw her escape.

"Certainly not, mamma," she said, and putting up her chin, she observed, strictly to herself, "Silly, indeed!" In that indignant poise, Mrs. Wildbore read scorn for Mr. Leyborne.

"You do not mean that he abused the privilege which he enjoyed of coming to the house from



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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time to time to assist me in the preparation of addresses, to make love to my daughter?"

"Oh, no, mamma." There had been no active move on Leyborne's part—she was quite sure of this—until Mrs. Wildbore had been three days on her voyage to India.

"Then why should my wishing to see him concern you?"

"Here is Mr. Strongi'th'arm," said Isabel. For once the curate's arrival was welcome.

"Tchah!" said Mrs. Wildbore.

Through the window of the dining-room Mr. Strongi'th'arm could be seen pedalling resolutely towards the house. He dismounted and leaned his bicycle against the porch. Then, after removing his hat, flattening his hair and polishing his face with a handkerchief, he rang the house-bell.

"This is ridiculous," said Mrs. Wildbore. "You had better go to your room. No, he will see you. Then you must be very cold, Isabel. Better still, we will go for a walk." She rose and went into the hall.

"I happened," said Mr. Strongi'th'arm, "to be passing, and I just looked in to ask if you would

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## STRONGI'TH'ARM PUT IN HIS PLACE

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care to glance over the music which I have selected."

"I will leave that entirely to your discretion," replied Mrs. Wildbore graciously. "Isabel, my umbrella. We were just going for a stroll, Mr. Strongi'th'arm. Till seven, then."

"In the schoolroom," he said. "You won't forget?"

"Exactly," said Mrs. Wildbore, with a grim smile. "In the schoolroom. Come, Isabel."

"You won't glance over the songs?" asked Mr. Strongi'th'arm desperately. He produced a book from his pocket.

"I have the utmost confidence in your judgment."

"Forgive me," he said, "but it would be a great pleasure—a great assistance if—I hardly dare to ask it—but—Miss Wildbore sings so beautifully. A solo from her would—eh?" He directed the appealing eye of a spaniel in disgrace towards Isabel.

"Oh," said Isabel, "I'm not going to the meeting, you know."

The curate's jaw fell till it completely concealed his clerical collar. Was it for this that he

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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had laboured? Was it for this that zeal for the Cause of Temperance had burned him up during the past week?

"My daughter," said Mrs. Wildbore, "is not exactly delicate,"—Isabel obviously abounded in health—"but we feel that a crowded meeting—coming out into the damp night air—risk of chill, you know. I fear," she concluded, "that we must not grant your request, Mr. Strongi'th'-arm. Come, Isabel."

They left the curate planted. As they turned the corner of the road, he was busily employed in the task of punching his back tyre.

The folly of Mr. Strongi'th'arm formed the text of Mrs. Wildbore's remarks for the next ten minutes. Her daughter's interest in the subject was remarkable. So long as Mr. Leyborne was not under discussion, Isabel was content.

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## CHAPTER VII

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### Heroic Conduct of Mr. Bithyman

**S**INCE Job's time the righteous man has been the especial prey of the Adversary. I have it on the authority of a well-known criminal Judge and an active Poor Law Guardian of Hull that the misfortunes of the just appear to be heaped upon them in direct proportion to their saintliness. The greater the number of convictions recorded against a docker, the more confidently will his lips assert his innocence; and the better acquainted with the interiors of casual wards a tramp appears to be, the more tearfully will he lament the bitter injustice to the worker of modern economic conditions.

Mr. Wildbore never questioned the equity of the trials which filled his life. They were all sent, he believed—even his wife—with the purpose of making him a better man. Sometimes perhaps he felt that the share of trouble which had come his way ought almost to have achieved

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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its purpose; that his character must surely be thoroughly refined by this time in the fire of tribulation; that he was approaching a period of life when Providence might begin to take a more sanguine view of him and give him a little respite.

He had on many previous occasions drawn a certain measure of solace—not unflattering to his self-esteem—from the comfortable words of Proverbs xi. 31, and as he drove along in the station fly, with Mr. Bouverie's bag on the seat facing him, he did so yet again. But he was slow to rebel. He condemned, rather, his own shortcomings, for he had an humble mind.

"It all comes," he reflected, "from my doubting Clarinda. When she said, 'The speech I require is in a brown-paper parcel marked "Addresses made during a Tour in India," which you will find in the right-hand front corner of the third drawer from the top on the left-hand side of my escritoire,' I should have known that it was so. I had no business to look. I should have remembered my inability to tie a firm knot. Had I brought the package intact, I should have been spared all this misery. The string would not have broken. The papers would not have

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## HEROIC CONDUCT

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been scattered on the pavement. The speech Clarinda wants would not have been lost. I should not have spent five shillings on this bag which I do not need. I should have had leisure to remark that I was in the Salisbury train. I should have been spared that terrible journey on foot across such very rough country. My toe would not now be inflamed. My clothing would not now be saturated with perspiration—which may be the death of me. I should not have endured the vile abuse of that odious person in the Station Hotel. And, above all, I should not have been forced to purchase a deadly reptile which at this moment lurks among Clarinda's addresses, ready at the first opening of the bag to spring out and inject its venom into my system.

"And," he cried aloud, an unbearable sense of his wrongs suddenly overwhelming him, "the worst of it is that I acted for the best."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the fly-man, turning round on the box.

"Nothing, nothing," said Mr. Wildbore hurriedly, and resumed his meditations.

"Now," he went on, "what am I to do? The speech is lost. To that I must confess. But I

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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have brought the others, and Clarinda will have at least material for to-night's meeting. There is, for example, 'The Semi-Teetotal Pledge—A farce,' 'The case against Compensation,' 'The Gothenburg System Examined, Answered and Demolished,' or 'Disinterested Management—its Follies, Weaknesses and Vices.' Any one of these will have as much weight here, in the school-room of Berwick Abbas, as in the most densely populated city of India. And there is 'The Banishment of Bung,' a very powerful indictment. But 'Deadly Poison' is lost, and I fear her annoyance will be great. Well, I have faced her annoyance before and I can again. If this were all, I should be comparatively happy. But it is not all.

"What am I to say about this snake?"

"It is there in that bag. Clarinda's first thought, when I reach Mulberry Farm, will be for her papers. She will wish to lose no time (and she will have no time to lose) in beginning her review of 'Deadly Poison.' Now this I know she cannot do, and my first care will be to acknowledge my error frankly. But then she will wish to look through the other speeches, to find

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## HEROIC CONDUCT

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one suitable for her audience. She will demand the bag. She will open it. The snake will bite her. No, she must not open the bag. She shall not open the bag—until it has been thoroughly baked.

“But what sufficient reason can I give for causing the bag to be baked? It is an unusual, an extraordinary course of procedure. I cannot say, ‘Clarinda, before you touch it, this bag must be baked.’ She will naturally ask me why. And then it must all come out. I must tell her the whole dreadful story. She will learn that I have not enough manliness in me to prevent a snake-catcher from forcing me to buy a loathsome and venomous serpent. She will not listen to me. She will make no allowances for the brutal fellow’s strength, my utter loneliness in the wood. She will simply see the one point that I have not had the courage to resist his importunities. She will wither me with her scorn. I can bear her resentment, but not her scorn. I dare say she will hold me up to ridicule before Isabel.

“Damn her!” he shouted.

Thirty years of oppression were behind that wicked word. Never before had Mr. Wildbore



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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allowed himself to get so thoroughly out of hand. Even to the inmost recesses of his soul, he had but twice in his life whispered such a thing. And now he had spoken it, yelled it on the public highway.

The driver pulled up in alarm.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said again, again turning round.

Mr. Wildbore was one blush.

"Go on," he said, and fell back on the cushions in utter horror of spirit. He had come to this.

"Old party's been overdoin' it," thought the driver. He winked and flicked up his mare.

For several minutes Mr. Wildbore lay staring vacantly at the single brass button which wobbled precariously on the driver's coat. The shade of trees brought him back to himself. Hitherto the fly had been travelling over heath land, but now it had entered the wood, beyond which lay Mulberry Farm. Mr. Wildbore knew that in five minutes some kind of an explanation must be forthcoming.

The proximity of danger braced him to action. Better risk death now than face the certainty of

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## HEROIC CONDUCT

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Clarinda's ridicule. He plucked the bag from the back seat and placed it between his knees.

"Driver," he said in a firm voice, "stop."

The mare willingly once more complied with her master's check on the reins.

"Get down," said Mr. Wildbore, "and come here. Bring your whip."

The driver obeyed.

"In this bag," said Mr. Wildbore, getting out of the fly, "is a dangerous snake. I am going to open the bag. Take your whip and when the snake puts its head out, kill it. Kill it instantly. Stand as far away as you can. Your whip, I see, is long. There is no danger for you. Only be sure you kill it. I want it killed."

Anybody but Mr. Wildbore would long ago have emptied the entire contents of the bag on to the ground and permitted the snake to crawl away. But Mr. Wildbore believed that the snake, once let loose, would not content itself with crawling away, but would inevitably spring on him and fasten its fangs in his hand, as the snake-catcher had warned him would be the case. When we remember this and reflect on the natural timidity of the old gentleman, we can begin to form some

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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estimate of the force of Mrs. Wildbore's character.

The driver was impressed by Mr. Wildbore's earnestness. He took his stand within striking distance of the bag which now lay on the ground at Mr. Wildbore's feet, his tense body inclined forward, his feet planted firmly, his knees bent, and his hands grasping the whip, its butt raised aloft to despatch the snake the instant it should show itself.

Mr. Wildbore opened the bag wide and sprang back with astonishing agility.

The bag lay between them on the road, its square mouth gaping skywards. They waited motionless, Mr. Wildbore with wide, apprehensive eye, the driver with an expression of terrific ferocity which, as time passed and nothing happened, changed slowly to one of infinite slyness. He began to have his own ideas of the snake in Mr. Wildbore's bag. The excitement under which the old gentleman clearly laboured only strengthened it. Mr. Wildbore was breathing heavily through his nose, a hectic spot glowed in each pale cheek, and his fingers were opening and closing spasmodically.

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## HEROIC CONDUCT

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"Don't seem to fancy the fresh air," said the driver. "What kind of a snake is it, sir?"

"I don't know," replied Mr. Wildbore, "but it is highly venomous. In colour it is a very pale pink."

"Pink," reflected the driver. "You seen many like that?" he asked.

"No," said Mr. Wildbore, "it is a very rare one."

"Not so rare neither," thought the driver, and masked a grin behind his hand.

Half a minute passed. The driver began to weary of the game. Suddenly he had an inspiration.

"Here he comes," he shouted.

"What?" cried Mr. Wildbore, retreating. "I don't see it."

"Yes, you do," roared the driver, "there 'e is." He pointed the butt of the whip haphazard at a spot in the road and proceeded to deliver half a dozen stout blows upon the unoffending macadam. "That's done for 'im," he shouted and, springing forward, he affected to snatch something from the ground and hurl it far from him among the trees. "There," he said soothingly,

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"that's the last you'll see of 'im, governor. We'd best get on, 'adn't we?"

Mr. Wildbore knew that his senses had not deceived him. There had certainly been no snake on the road. The driver had clearly beaten nothing but the earth. Either the man was out of his mind—or he, Mr. Wildbore, was. Neither alternative comforted him in the slightest. He felt that in the first case, alone as he was, it would be impolitic to deny the truth of the driver's assertions. The fellow might fall into a frenzy and assault him. In the second case he had certainly better go home at once. But why didn't the snake come out?

"Thank you, my man," he said, for the driver was holding the fly's door open invitingly. "You have behaved in a very prompt and courageous way. Yes, you killed it capitally."

"Pore old bloke," thought the driver. Then he said aloud, "You git into the fly, sir, an' I'll take this yere bag up on the box." He stepped forward.

"Don't touch that bag," cried Mr. Wildbore, terrified for the other's life. "The creature is inside."

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## HEROIC CONDUCT

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"Oh, come, Mr. Wildbore, sir," said the flyman. "Didn't you see me break him up small with your own eyes and chuck him into that there bramble?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wildbore, "yes. But—in short—the snake is in the bag. Don't touch it," he shrieked.

"Look yere, governor," said the flyman. "I can't stay 'ere argufying all day with you. You git into the fly an' go on or pay me my fare and lemme git back to the station."

"Give me your whip," said Mr. Wildbore, "I will stir it up."

"All right," said the flyman, "but nothing won't come out. I tell yer 'e's dead. Killed *and* dead."

Mr. Wildbore approached the bag cautiously. Standing as far away as possible, he inserted the copper-bound butt of the whip into the mouth of the bag and thrust it downwards.

A familiar sound—the chink of metal on glass was the only result.

"Hark at him," said the flyman jocosely. "'E's sayin' 'is prayers, that's wot 'e's doin'."

"Let us have no profanity, please," said Mr. Wildbore severely. "I don't understand this at

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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all. There seem to be no papers in my bag. It was full of them—besides the snake,” he added, moving forward.

“And the rats,” said the driver. “Not to speak of the blue spiders an’ the red croco——”

He was interrupted by a wailing cry. Mr. Wildbore had flung himself on his knees in the dust of the road and was staring into the mouth of the bag, which his own almost equalled for bigness.

“Brandy,” he gasped.

“That’s done it,” thought the driver, in whose mind no doubt as to what was the matter with his fare any longer existed. “I didn’t ought to ’ave said that about the spiders. That’s set ’im off. Fancy a respectable old gent like ’im. Expect ’is wife’s at the bottom of this. ’Er an’ ’er penny. Now,” he continued, as he began to strip off his coat, “now for a bit of first aid to the afflicted.” With these words he cast himself upon Mr. Wildbore and pinned him on the earth. “Lucky for me,” he panted, “I’ve had experience of these coves with Sam.”

He referred to his brother-in-law, the notoriously intemperate blacksmith of Chadley.

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## HEROIC CONDUCT

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The struggle was short. Mr. Wildbore, at no time a robust man, had this day already gone through more than he was fit to bear. His alarm did truly lend him strength to strike the driver in the eye, but his vital force had been sapped by much walking and more excitement, and, in a few seconds, he lay on his back passive and staring up into the purple face of the driver with large frightened eyes.

"Will you lie still, old party?" hissed the driver.

"Yes," said Mr. Wildbore, "only spare my life."



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## CHAPTER VIII

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### Plucky Action of a Doctor

**L**EYBORNE set out briskly up the lane which led to Mr. Green's farm. It was good to breathe God's air again after the addled fluid which does duty in Kennington. It was good to stretch his legs on the springy turf that flanked the road, after the unyielding paving-stones of South London. It was good to feel the hot sun strike straight on the back, unmitigated by the sooty vomitings of twenty million chimneys. Great clumps of trees in the high glory of their foliage, very restful to the eye, stood dotted over the country. Swallows were skating about, high up. A yaffle holloaed and flew across a clearing. The air droned with insects busy among the wild flowers. The purple of heather promised everywhere.

In about ten minutes the house for which he looked hove in sight, and he saw a short, heavy man of respectable exterior leaning over a pigsty,

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## PLUCKY ACTION OF A DOCTOR

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examining its inhabitants with a calculating eye.

"Mr. Green?" asked Leyborne.

"My name, young gen'leman."

"I understand that you have a little thing."

"I be's gat a lil thing, young sir."

"I am informed that it is for hire."

"'Er be fer higher, young master."

"Then," said Leyborne, "shall we put Dobbin in the shafts?"

"My 'orse be named Spotty," replied Mr. Green carefully. "A good old friend. Thirty-five year 'e 'ave toi-uld for I."

"I hope," said Leyborne politely, "that he has one more afternoon's work in him."

"Wayer do 'ee want fer ter go?" asked Mr. Green. "Far? My 'orse Spotty be-un't wot 'e wore."

"Only to Mulberry Farm."

"Tichborne's?" cried Mr. Green. "Blaz 'ee, then, 'tis only a stap from yur to thayer. Wot do 'ee want of my lil thing? 'Ee'll wark in fiv-deen minutes, sur. An' by road it be a matter o' dree mile."

"I dare say," said Leyborne. "But I have luggage at the station."

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Much?" asked Mr. Green. "My 'orse Spotty be-un't wot 'e wore."

"No, not very much. But more than we can carry."

"Us?" echoed Mr. Green. "Many?"

"My friend and I only."

"Two on yer?" cried Mr. Green. "An' baggage? And I? No, sur, 'tis more'n my 'orse Spotty can do, sure. No, by Gor! 'Twere cruelty to animiles."

"I'll pay you well," said Leyborne, who had no fancy to return on foot to the station.

Mr. Green reflectively scratched with the point of his stick the spine of the hog nearest him.

"I ax five shillin'," he said at last, watching Leyborne narrowly.

"Right," said Leyborne.

"That be five shillin' fer 'ee, an' a shillin' fer yer baggage."

"Right," said Leyborne.

"An' a shillin' fer——"

"Mr. Green," said Leyborne, "take six bob or leave it. I won't spring another farthing."

The farmer heaved a great sigh and detached himself slowly from the pigsty.

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## PLUCKY ACTION OF A DOCTOR

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"Crueldy to animiles," he was understood to be muttering as he went. "Tarrible 'ot day. Dree mile an' more. Dree in the lil thing *an'* baggage. Don' seem right. No, by Gor! 'tis cruel 'ard on my 'orse Spotty."

So grumbling he reached a shed vilely thatched and leaning all to one side, which, on the door being opened, was found to be divided lengthwise by a wooden partition. In one of the stalls thus formed stood a venerable grey horse. In the other lay the remains of a victoria. This was the little thing.

Mr. Green, always with the most deliberate movements, presently harnessed the horse and, with Leyborne's help, got him between the shafts of the victoria and precariously attached to it. Then he climbed heavily to the box and said, "Come ter think of it, sur, 'ee'd best wark ter Tichborne's. Dree in yur's too much. My 'orse Spotty can't drah so many, and the lil thing'd likely come azunder. Do 'ee wark, then."

"But I don't want to walk," cried Leyborne.

"Then *I* don' wan' ter drighve," said Mr. Green, placing his foot on the wheel.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Oh, I'll walk," said Leyborne peevishly, yielding to circumstances.

"Bide along that path thayer," said Mr. Green, "till 'ee come ter road and then follow road till 'ee come ter Tichborne's. Ee yup, my 'orse Spotty!"

The little thing began to move and Leyborne was left alone.

"Curse Mr. Green," he said, "and his cruelty to animals. Well, I dare say I'm better off than poor old Bouverie. Hope we'll see him before to-morrow morning."

He struck into the path indicated by Mr. Green and followed it according to directions. Soon he was in a wood where the path twisted about through the thick undergrowth, as woodland paths do. He pursued his way for perhaps fifteen minutes and soon expected to come out on the private road to Mulberry Farm, which he surmised lay ahead of him.

Suddenly his heart leaped in his bosom, for just ahead of him a cry, as of a soul in mortal agony, rang out through the quiet of the place.

On instinct Leyborne broke into a run. There was no mistaking the meaning of that sound. It

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## PLUCKY ACTION OF A DOCTOR

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was a call for help. Murder stalked the Forest this day.

The cry was not repeated, but Leyborne held on at his best pace. As he ran he shifted his grip on his walking-stick to a place near the ferrule. A few turns of the path and he burst out into a road where two men lay in a struggle to the death. Not far away a horse, between the shafts of a fly, cropped the juicy herbage of the wayside.

A powerful ruffian in his shirt-sleeves knelt above a small old man in decent clothes shockingly besmirched with dust. So much Leyborne noticed as he sprang to the rescue.

He leaped on the back of the aggressor. In a moment he had his elbow round the fellow's throat, and had forced his chin up. At the same time he caught him by the right wrist and pulled the arm upwards and backwards. He was in a position now, by exercising a trifle of extra force, either to dislocate the neck or snap the arm like a carrot.

The Japanese—who 'see beauty everywhere—call this hold 'The Melting of the Snow' in allusion to the manner in which the courage of the other man is dissolved and vanishes.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Give in, you blackguard," hissed Leyborne.

Then he discovered with a shock compounded of pain and surprise that he was glaring into the face of the station flyman, whom he knew well for a person of unblemished reputation, a Baptist deacon, and the father of fourteen children.

"Bithyman!" he said, too much astonished even to release his grip. "You!"

The flyman made a sound in his throat which Leyborne's trained medical ear recognised as a death rattle.

He loosed his grip and stood up. The flyman tottered to his feet.

"Mr. Leyborne," he said, "wotever did you go for to do that for, sir?"

"I'm sorry," said Leyborne, "I thought you were murdering this old man. Mr. Wildbore!" he cried, in the extremity of astonishment.

"You know the old party?" asked the flyman.

"Certainly I do," said Leyborne, as he helped Mr. Wildbore to sit up. "What on earth possessed you to attack him like that, Bithyman?"

"'Ad to," said the flyman as he got into his coat. "For 'is own good, sir. 'E sees things. Snakes, Mr. Leyborne." And he winked with

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## PLUCKY ACTION OF A DOCTOR

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horrible meaning. "In that there bag they are," he said.

"You're mad," cried Leyborne. "Mr. Wildbore is a lifelong teetotaller."

"Well," said the flyman as he regarded Mr. Wildbore critically, "I've driven him two or three times an' I always thought 'im a respectable old gent. An' with that blue ribbon an' all you'd never think it. But there's no knowin', sir. 'E sees snakes and that's good enough for me. An' wot I says is this," he continued, as one who knew, "w'en they begins, don't give 'em a chance. 'Old 'em down from the first. Because if they gets loose they'll hurt themselves. Look at my brother-in-law Sam. Took and tried to break up the red 'ot range with 'is blessed naked 'ands, 'e did. Said the devil was grinnin' at 'im, sir, through the bars, 'e said. Said he were surprised at me, bein' a deacon an' a religious man, tryin' to 'old 'im back. Said it was the chance of a lifetime, sir, for a pore sinner like 'im to get to 'eaven no matter wot 'e'd done in the past, sir, or might do in the future, sir. 'E went on 'orrible, sir, and 'e wept bitter, sir, an' it took four on us an' a rope to persuade 'im to be quiet, sir.



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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An' I seen two other cases, sir, too, sir. When I was a young chap, at 'ome, sir, in Waltham Cross, sir. Oh, I've 'ad experience, sir, all right; and wot I says is—'Old 'em down from the first."

All this time Mr. Wildbore had been sitting up in the dust of the road gasping slowly like a fish that has been some time on the bank. Now he was heard to say in a weak voice—

"Mr. Leyborne, please send that man away. I don't understand his conduct, but I can bear the sight of him no longer. He is dangerous."

Leyborne gave Mr. Bithyman half a sovereign. "I haven't the slightest doubt, Bithyman," he said, "that you acted for the best. But you had better go now. I will see Mr. Wildbore home. I don't think you will hear anything more about this."

"Well, if I do," said the flyman, "you'll bear me out, Mr. Leyborne, sir, that I was only 'olding of 'im down, and that my intentions was good. Axing your pardon, sir," he said to Mr. Wildbore, "an' very sorry if I 'ave ilconvenienced you."

"Go," said Mr. Wildbore faintly. "Go at once."

Mr. Bithyman clambered on to his box, wheeled the fly round and departed whence he had come.

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## CHAPTER IX

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### Painful Scene Between Two Gentlemen

**I**S that your bag, Mr. Wildbore?" asked Leyborne.

"Don't you dare," screamed Mr. Wildbore, "to go near that bag. Stand back, Mr. Leyborne."

His manner was so wild that across Leyborne's mind there flitted a fearful doubt. Could the fly-man have been right? But, no, it was impossible. On Mr. Wildbore's face there was not a sign of alcoholic excess. Besides, with such a wife it was out of the question. Yet the old gentleman's actions were not altogether those of a man in full possession of himself.

Mr. Wildbore had begun to crawl across the road, being still too shaken to stand, towards the bag which stood open on the ground. When he reached it he peered shrinkingly into its interior and then, with a gasp, closed it and snapped the lock.

"Were you going to Mulberry Farm?" asked

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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Leyborne, thinking it best, like a wise man, to ignore what he could not understand. He was by now prepared to make a pretty close guess as to the identity of the two ladies who had taken the fly.

"Yes," replied Mr. Wildbore. "Your hand, I beg, Mr. Leyborne. Thank you. Yes," he continued, as he stood up and began to rub the dirt into his clothes with his palms, under the impression, no doubt, that he was brushing it off. "Yes, my wife and I are staying there."

"With——"

"Yes, with Isabel. With, in short, my daughter. I need not remind you, Mr. Leyborne, of our last interview."

"No," said Leyborne. "It took place under less romantic circumstances, but I was too much disappointed with its result to forget what was said. But, permit me——" and with his handkerchief he began to flap the dust from Mr. Wildbore's coat.

"There still remain six months of your year of probation, Mr. Leyborne," said Mr. Wildbore meaningly.

"The end of six months, Mr. Wildbore," said

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## SCENE BETWEEN TWO GENTLEMEN

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Leyborne, continuing his ministrations, "finds me in the same mind. I have no right to ask if Isa—is your daughter——"

"Since it was agreed that you and she should hold no verbal or written communication for twelve months, sir," said Mr. Wildbore, "my daughter and I have not discussed the matter. But I trust—I may say, I hope—that she has, like a sensible girl, abandoned all idea of becoming your wife. A medical student who has already failed to pass into the Army——"

"I was very young then," said Leyborne, "and I admit that I wasted my time at the Crammer's——"

"Who has, after four years in the city, failed to satisfy the directors of no less than three Limited Companies that he has an aptitude for business——"

"I could have satisfied them in five minutes," said Leyborne, "if they would have let me. But my father would have it that I was fit for nothing but a desk."

"Who has failed in journalism——"

"I own," said Leyborne, "that that was a mistake."

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"And has generally shown himself," Mr. Wildbore went on doggedly, in pursuit of his sentence, "incompetent and extravagant—such a medical student, sir——"

"I beg your pardon," said Leyborne, stung to the quick by the repetition of this injustice. "I am two months qualified."

"Is not," concluded Mr. Wildbore, "a fit husband for the daughter of Mrs. Wildbore."

"My father's recent death," said Leyborne, "has left me comfortably off. I am perfectly able to support Isabel, and I deny your right to cast in my teeth a record of which I own frankly I am heartily ashamed when I have shown that I am able to surmount the difficulties of the Conjoint Qualification."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Wildbore, "I have done you wrong, in which case I apologize. You have shown great promptness this afternoon and for that I am grateful. But I wish you to understand clearly, in case you are to be in this neighbourhood, that I do not release you from your promise and that I shall expect you to observe it. You will not speak to Isabel if you meet her, as I fear you may if you are staying hereabouts."

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## SCENE BETWEEN TWO GENTLEMEN

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"Do you expect me to cut her?" cried Leyborne. "My dear sir, I am engaged to her. There!" he added pleasantly, with a final flick of his handkerchief, "now you look respectable again."

"No, no," said Mr. Wildbore, "not engaged. On probation, Mr. Leyborne. If you meet her, yes, you may raise your hat—but no conversation. Remember I have your word."

"I will respect your wishes," said Leyborne, "and my own promise, and so, no doubt, will she. But tell me," he went on, "what is the matter with me? I have five hundred a year and the use of my limbs, and your daughter loves me. What more do you want, Mr. Wildbore?"

"As I told you at our last interview, it is utterly impossible for me—for us to part with Isabel at present. The thought of her being no longer in the house is most painful to me—to Mrs. Wildbore and myself, I should say. You cannot think what her marriage would mean to me—that is, to my wife and me."

"I confess," said Leyborne, "that I think principally of what it would mean to me."

"Isabel's happiness," pursued Mr. Wildbore,

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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as he endeavoured to flatten out an unfashionable dint in his silk hat, "is of course my chief concern. I am glad to say," he went on carefully, "that the year of probation has, I believe, answered all my expectations. She seems quite happy and has evidently put you out of her mind." He smiled amiably.

"That," said Leyborne, "is what we shall see."

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Wildbore suddenly. "Where are you staying?" he demanded.

"At Mulberry Farm," replied Leyborne. "You must believe me when I tell you I had no idea that you were there when I wired this morning for rooms. I have been here many times."

The smile faded from Mr. Wildbore's face. "Did you," he asked, "ever mention the place to Isabel?"

"I think so. Yes, I have told her about it. I come here every summer, you know."

"Hum!" said Mr. Wildbore. He remembered that Isabel had found the advertisement of Mulberry Farm in the newspaper, that she had herself gone down to spy out the place, that she had returned with a glowing report of it which had practically decided Mrs. Wildbore—who was at

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## SCENE BETWEEN TWO GENTLEMEN

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the time indisposed and unable to travel—in its favour. Perhaps the girl's abandonment of Leyborne was not so complete as he had hoped.

"Hum!" he said for the second time. "The position will be awkward—for you. Is it quite necessary for you to come? There are other places in the neighbourhood. Mr. Green, I believe, takes in boarders."

"Mr. Green," said Leyborne, "is not a starter."

"You will not," said Mr. Wildbore anxiously, "attempt to force yourself on the recollection of my wife? Had she been in England six months ago, she would have known how to take better care of her daughter than, alas, I did! Should she hear of this business she would be most rightly displeased. I trust that you will not mention it. For your own sake I give you this counsel."

"Mr. Wildbore," said Leyborne, "I will not go to Mr. Green's or anywhere else, because I have engaged rooms at Mulberry Farm for a friend and myself, and you have no shadow of a right to attempt to drive me away. I will not pledge myself to any particular course of conduct with regard to Mrs. Wildbore. I will not force myself on her recollection, because that is



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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not my way, but if it should happen—as it must—that circumstances bring us together and—as it may—that she is good enough to receive me in a friendly spirit, I assure you that I will not give you away. No doubt if Mrs. Wildbore had been at home six months ago I should have been forbidden the house long before I had gained Isabel's love. But I will not tell Mrs. Wildbore that you let the then penniless Medical steal her daughter's heart beneath your very eyes. I will not tell Mrs. Wildbore that, in sheer terror of being left alone with her for the rest of your life"—Mr. Wildbore gave a little gasp of fury here—"you turned me out and forced us to make this ridiculous promise of silence for a year, in the hope that Isabel would change her mind. These things are not for Mrs. Wildbore's ears. Neither Isabel nor I will speak to each other without your permission, and I shall leave you to find the plausible explanation of our silence which your wife may require. On the whole, I think you had better give us back our promise and let me win my own way with Mrs. Wildbore. My father's death has left me quite independent, and I venture to describe myself as a perfectly suitable match for

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## SCENE BETWEEN TWO GENTLEMEN

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any girl' of the Central Middle Classes. I think Mrs. Wildbore will see me in that light—but if she doesn't, it signifies no whit. I intend to marry Isabel and Isabel intends to marry me. With so much, let us drop this discussion. Permit me to offer you my arm as far as the house. Shall I not carry your bag?"

"You shall not touch it," said Mr. Wildbore, "and I do not desire your company."

At all costs he must get rid of the bag and its appalling contents before his wife sets eyes on it. If he arrived with nothing, he could say that he had left the package of speeches in the train. (Heaven help him! Where was he drifting?) But a bag in his hand could only mean that he had brought the speeches. Clarinda would open it.

A brandy bottle and tin after tin of cigarettes!

A strong fit of shuddering took him at the thought, and his false teeth actually clashed together with a terrifying sound.

"You are ill, Mr. Wildbore," cried Leyborne. "As a medical man I beg you to let me feel your pulse." The flyman's suspicions recurred to him. It might be that a fever——

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Leave me!" cried Mr. Wildbore. He noted out of the corner of his eye a thick, high clump of nettles within the wood. A bag might lie there undiscovered till the winter.

"As a medical man," said Leyborne, "I decline to leave you. Come, sir, be persuaded. Take my arm. Give me the bag——"

"*Will* you go away, sir?" cried Mr. Wildbore. "Do you add to your other insolences that of thrusting your company upon me in the face of my repeated expression of a desire to be alone? I am *not* ill. I will *not* show you my tongue. I will *not* take your arm. If you will not leave me, I will leave you, sir."

He began to climb into the ditch which fringed the road. Once in the shelter of the wood——

But he was never to reach it.

At this moment a voice which was only too terribly familiar uttered the one word, "Willy."

So heated had the discussion waxed between the two men that the approach of Mrs. Wildbore and Isabel had been unobserved by either of them.

"Willy," said Mrs. Wildbore, "come out of that ditch. You will get your feet wet and I shall be up with you all night. Ah! Mr. Ley-

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## SCENE BETWEEN TWO GENTLEMEN

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borne," she cried warmly, "it is you. This is a pleasant"—here she caught sight of Isabel's blushing cheeks and remembered that certain things had yet to be explained—"a pleasant afternoon," she ended, with a sudden chilling of manner. "Willy," she continued, turning from Leyborne, "may I ask where you have been all day? I presume you missed your train and came by a later one—the one that Isabel and I took from Southampton. But first of all, did you bring my addresses?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wildbore, very willing to let her presume anything she pleased. "Yes, Clarinda, that is——"

"That is enough," said his wife, "I suppose they are in that bag. Pray bring it with you and let us return to the farm. I have work to do which has been delayed quite long enough. Good afternoon, Mr. Leyborne," she added.

"Good afternoon," said Leyborne, withdrawing his eyes hastily from those of Isabel. "Let me carry the bag, Mr. Wildbore."

"No," said Mr. Wildbore, drawing it quickly behind his back.

"We could not think of troubling you," said

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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Mrs. Wildbore freezingly. "An able young man," she thought, "but on ill terms with his father. A pity. But he must be nipped in the bud. Come, Isabel," she said. "Come, Willy. Good afternoon, Mr. Leyborne."

"Well," thought Leyborne, as he watched the Wildbore family disappear round the bend of the road, "that's not very promising. Has the old Bunny (he referred to his father-in-law to be) said anything? No, he daren't. Has Belle confessed to the old hag? (He meant Mrs. Wildbore.) No—she couldn't. She must have crushed me on general principles as an undesirable. She has at last waked up to the knowledge that Belle is no longer a child. Gad, what a freeze-out! The old chough! I can sympathise with Bunnyfunking being left alone with that. Still, though it costs him his last remaining spark of happiness, Belle must be rescued."

And he set out towards the station to meet the little thing.

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## CHAPTER X

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### Ruminations of an Inebriate

**L**ET us return to that genial Mr. Bouverie whom we have left seated on his portman-teau an unconscionably long time.

Warmed with drink (and quite unashamed), refreshed by slumber, and diverted by his encounter with Mr. Wildbore, he smoked a cigarette while he waited, without too much impatience, for Leyborne to come and carry him away from the station. And as he smoked he ruminated pleasantly on the folly of his friend and his own strength of character.

"Silly ass," he thought. "Silly old ass, Leyborne. Good fellow, though, and much obliged for his interest in my painful case. But silly ass all the same. 'S if I had no will o' me own. Told me I couldn't go into that bar and not come out tight. Well, haven't I gone into that bar? Yes. And am I tight? No. Very well, then. For twopence I'd go in again, only he might roll up

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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any minute now, and besides"—he ogled the bag that lay by his side—"there's no need. Any coward," he continued, "can keep off drink when there's none for him to have, but it takes a man to say 'no' when there's a bottle in his bedroom—and that's the kind of man *I* am. Glad to say, can always stop. Of course, last night was a little exceptional. But it was Bailey's birthday, I think, and dash it! it's a poor heart that never rejoices. But it did jar me up a bit findin' myself in that bonnet. Mustn't occur again. In fact, shall not. Mind made up about that, quite. I suppose now, Leyborne would tell me that I couldn't take that bottle out and look at it without finishing it. Well, I say I could, and I'll show him."

He stretched forth his hand towards the bag and instantly drew it back guiltily, for he heard the sound of wheels outside the station.

"There's Leyborne," he said crossly. "Interferin' fool——"

The porter came out and said, "Your trap, sir. Mr. Green, sir, an' 'is little thing, sir."

"Put 'em in, porter," said Bouverie. "Put 'em in—no, not that one. I'll take that." He car-

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## RUMINATIONS OF AN INEBRIATE

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ried the handbag out himself carefully. It had occurred to him that something might chink.

"Where's my friend?" he demanded.

"'E 'ave warked on to Mulberry," said Mr. Green. "'Ee's goin' thayer, I reckon?"

"Dashed unsociable of him," thought Bouverie, as he climbed into the little thing, "might 've come back for a fellow. Stuck up ass. No," he said to the porter, who had taken his burden from him, "put that small bag in there. Put it on the back seat, porter. Now," he thought, "I will watch that bag all the way, and I won't open it, not once. Will o' me own, *I* have."

He handed the porter some money, Mr. Green touched up his horse Spotty, and they rolled away.

But Bouverie had a grievance and stuck to it.

"I don't think it's very wise of Leyborne," he said to himself, "to treat me as he does. I like a drink, and admit I had too much last night and admit must go slow for a bit, but don't admit his right to treat me like a kid. Takes a man's self-respect away. Now if *I* was looking after a fellow who wanted to go slow, I should simply surround him with bottles and I should say, 'Old man, I trust you,' I should say. And



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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then I should leave him, and if he was worth a kick he'd be all right. It'd put backbone into such a fellow. But that's not Leyborne's way. He says—or as good as says—'I don't trust you the length of my boot, and you've got to swear and ask to be struck perpendicular if you touch a drop.' It's enough to drive a man to the devil. However, lucky I'm not small-minded. I can laugh at Leyborne, *I* can."

These thoughts and others in the same vein of fallacy occupied his leisure while the little thing pursued its tranquil way. By the end of the first mile Mr. Bouverie had decided that he was thoroughly dissatisfied with Leyborne's treatment of his case and convinced that the method which he had adumbrated some minutes earlier was the only wise one. Perhaps the heat of the afternoon and the dust which Mr. Green's horse Spotty and the little thing together contrived to raise from the road influenced him unconsciously in favour of this latter decision.

The shade of a wood alleviated his distress to some small extent, but as one pleasure at a time is never enough for man, it led him to think of the contents of the bag with even greater interest.

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## RUMINATIONS OF AN INEBRIATE

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"Now," he said, "this is what Leyborne would call the cravin'. What a rotten word! I'm cravin' nothin'. Nothin' at all. I'm thirsty, yes, who wouldn't be in this infernal heat? But anything would do for me: water, ginger-beer, anything. That's the best of me. *I* don't want booze. *I* don't crave for alcohol. But, damme! even a teetotaller may be thirsty. There's no harm in *that*. But it's rather rough luck that I've got to go dry, and a drink within reach, simply because Leyborne thinks I've no self-control. It isn't as if I was a teetotaller. Never took any pledge and never will. That's all right for weak-minded cowards who can't say 'no' without signin' their names on a picture-card and hangin' it over their shavin'-glass. Of course I'm *practically* a teetotaller now, but I never said I wouldn't drink if it was necessary, for medical purposes, and that. Begad, this heat's makin' me quite faint! I swear it is—I believe I ought to have one nip. My promise to Leyborne can't possibly hold where illness is concerned. He's a doctor and he'd be the first to prescribe it. By Jove, I do feel rocky! Well, I can stick it out. *I'll* show him. Any other man would make this an excuse for having a bite

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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out of the bottle in that bag. I don't. But I ought to do something, for I know I'm really ill. Only a particularly silly fool would let a half-promise to a chap who don't trust him prevent him from savin' his life. P'raps if I just sniffed the cork——"

He drew a safety corkscrew from his pocket.

He took the yellow bag on his knees and opened it.

Instantly a little flat head on a long pale neck darted out, flickered a tongue at him and was withdrawn.

Mr. Bouverie gave vent to a sickly moan and shut the bag hurriedly. He closed his eyes and leaned back, passing a damp hand across a damper brow.

"Leyborne was right," he whispered. "It was that last whack at the public. I'd no idea they looked so real. If it hadn't been that ghastly pink—but the pink proves it."

Suddenly the little thing stopped, and leaning out he saw Leyborne holding up his hand.

"Leyborne," he cried weakly. "I say, old fellow, come in here. I've got some horrible news."

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## RUMINATIONS OF AN INEBRIATE

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"My 'orse Spotty," said Mr. Green, "be-unt wot 'e wore. 'E shall not drah the dree on us *an'* the baggage."

"Mr. Green objects to my overloading the little thing," said Leyborne.

"Old friend," said Bouverie shakily, in a low voice, "you've *got* to come in. If old Kafoozalum up there makes any objection, tell him I'll pull him off his box and roll him in the road. Only you've *got* to come in. It is frightfully important."

"Another shilling, Mr. Green," said Leyborne.

"Crueldy to animiles," said Mr. Green, "is a thing I can't abayer. Make it two——"

"Two it is," said Leyborne, who was impressed by the disorder of Bouverie's features. And he climbed into the little thing, which proceeded.

"Old man," said Bouverie, clutching his friend by the wrist, "I've got 'em."

"Eh?" cried Leyborne.

"It's a fact. You were right, Leyborne, and I was a fool not to believe you. I've got 'em good, and they're horrible. Isn't it awful that

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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one little extra drink should be enough to do the trick?"

"So you had a drink in the pub?" Leyborne said severely.

"Yes, old man. But I swear it was only because I thought you were wrong. I had it and at first it did me no end of good, for I was really feeling awfully faint. Then—I'll make a clean breast of it—I bought a bottle of brandy, Leyborne. Not to drink, old friend. I swear I'd never have touched it. But I wanted to show you that I could keep off it, even when it was in my bedroom. I put it in that bag with the cigarettes. Well, just before we met you I wanted to get out a few cigarettes to fill my case." He paused.

"To fill your case," said Leyborne encouragingly. "Yes?"

"So I opened the bag. And then I knew I'd got 'em."

"How?"

"I saw the most ghastly-lookin' brute of a snake. It seemed to stick its head out and then it vanished. So I shut the bag and then you came. Lucky you did, old man, or I should have gone off my onion." He shuddered and

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## RUMINATIONS OF AN INEBRIATE

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passed his handkerchief across his beaded brow.

Now Leyborne knew very well that Bouverie was not within a couple of years of delirium tremens, but he judged it well to do nothing which might dispel this salutary illusion.

Meanwhile any explanation there might be of Bouverie's vision might wait.

"You're quite sure," he said, "that there was nothing in the bag, when you last looked into it, but the bottle of brandy and the cigarette-boxes?"

"Absolutely," said Bouverie. "I had to empty the boxes out to get the bottle in. Then I fitted the boxes round it. There was nothing else."

"And," said Leyborne, "it has never been opened since?"

"Only when I got 'em."

"Then," said Leyborne, "I'm afraid you're in a pretty serious state, Bouverie."

"One moment," said Bouverie. "The old bloke who kissed the barmaid may have been playing his monkey tricks on me while I was asleep." He gave a jocular account of his interview in the hotel sitting-room. His description of the old gentleman as a cross between a pink-eyed rabbit and a billiard ball was a sufficient

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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identification of Mr. Wildbore for any one who happened to know that he was in the neighbourhood.

"Of course," said Leyborne, "he may have put something in the bag, though it seems an uncommon odd thing for anybody to do. We'd better look again."

"Leyborne, old boy," said Bouverie, "this thing has shaken me all up, and to tell you the truth, as man to man, I daren't do it. But if you will, I'll be everlastingly grateful to you. Do it, please, and put me out of my suspense. If there is something in there I'm all right, and if there isn't, I've got 'em and there's an end of it. But I must know, for this uncertainty is worse than any of 'em could possibly be." He covered his eyes with his hands. "Look inside the bag, old friend," he said, "and tell me the worst at once."

Leyborne opened the bag and looked into it.

He saw a brown-paper parcel. On top of it lay, coiled up, a small snake, which he recognised instantly as a blind worm, though a white one. It is rare that a little knowledge of natural history has more usefully served its possessor. As he closed the bag his eye noted, written on the

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## RUMINATIONS OF AN INEBRIATE

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parcel, the words "Mrs. Wildbore," followed by an address. The bag clicked and Bouverie groaned.

"Well," thought Leyborne, "Providence evidently intends me to look after the old woman's property to-day, and I will. I may find a chance of doing myself a bit of good with this. But I might be sporing the old man. He must have dropped 'Deadly Poison' in London, and I find *that*; and now he must have taken Bouverie's bag in mistake for his own, in the pub, and I find his in Bouverie's possession now. *That's* why he wouldn't let me carry his bag for him. He'd found Bouverie's bottle and smokes in it. Poor old thing! What a jar it must have given him! But I believe I've got him on toast if I can only work things right."

"Well?" whispered Bouverie, unable to endure the suspense any longer.

"There's absolutely nothing in the bag," said Leyborne, "but your bottle and cigarettes."

"Then," said Bouverie, and shuddered again, "I *have* got 'em. What d'you think I'll see next, Leyborne?"



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Nothing," said Leyborne. "That is, if you'll only do as I tell you."

"Anything, old friend."

"Then *I* will take care of this bag."

"Give me the cigarettes, anyhow," said Bouverie.

"No, Bouverie. In your present condition you must give your nerves every chance. No more cigarettes."

"All right!" said Bouverie humbly. He remembered, with some satisfaction, that his case was very nearly full and it held thirty. "That'll see me through till to-morrow," he reflected.

"Your case, Bouverie," said Leyborne.

"Didn't I tell you," cried Bouverie, "that I was goin' to fill it when I opened the bag?"

"Yes. But I want it. Fork it out."

Bouverie laughed, quite unabashed, and handed it to him. "I say," he observed, "you are a terror. There's no gettin' over *you*, is there?"

Leyborne bestowed the case in his pocket, without comment, which, as the newspapers say, would have been superfluous.

And thereupon they came to Mulberry Farm.

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## CHAPTER XI

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### Mr. Bagshaw Intervenes

**I** HAVE a little time before tea-dinner," said Mrs. Wildbore to her husband. "If you will carry that bag over to the tree, I will run through 'Deadly Poison.' I suppose it is in the bag?"

Mr. Wildbore, with lagging steps, followed his wife on to a circular lawn which adjoined the farmhouse. In the middle of it there grew an ancient mulberry tree. Here, in the shade, two or three canvas chairs marked the spot where the visitors were accustomed to pass the hotter hours of their days. A work-bag hung from a low-growing branch.

"Take my work-bag off that knob, Willy," said Mrs. Wildbore, "and hang the other in the same place. That is a most convenient branch. Then take the work-bag to our room, if you please, and bring my reading spectacles which you will find on the right-hand side of the mantel-

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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piece. Put the work-bag in the chest of drawers—the top drawer, Willy.”

Mr. Wildbore, giving himself up for lost, did as he was bid. A minute or two later he looked out through the window of his bedroom and cast a fearful glance in the direction of the mulberry tree. No—the crisis still delayed to arrive. Mrs. Wildbore was seated in a resigned attitude, her hands folded in her lap. The yellow bag depended from the branch within a foot of her elbow. Isabel was immediately beneath the window inhaling idly the odour of some roses.

Suddenly the thought of Leyborne intruded itself upon Mr. Wildbore's mind. That undesirable young man would be here presently. So far Isabel had behaved with admirable propriety—but would she continue to do so? Would she not perhaps commit some indiscretion which might lead his wife to suspect? That she would take her mother into her confidence he did not believe; he had never yet known her to do such a thing. But for the girl's own sake (not to speak of his own) he must warn her to be discreet.

“Isabel,” he whispered, “Isabel.”

“Yes, papa?” said Isabel.

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## MR. BAGSHAW INTERVENES

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"Hush! Not so loud. Come into the sitting-room. I want a word with you." He grabbed his wife's spectacles from the right-hand side of the mantelpiece, laid the work-bag on the dressing-table, and descended hurriedly in search of his daughter.

"What's the matter, papa?" she asked.

"This man, Mr. Leyborne," he said. "You will observe your promise?"

"I have done so," she replied. "It is very absurd since he is coming to stay here; but I will not speak to him—nor will he to me. We gave you our word, didn't we?"

"Yes, my dear, yes. But your mother—it would never do for her to find out that—in short, I cannot have her learn that—I mean it would distress me very much if she knew that——"

"That we are engaged—Oh! she shall know nothing about it."

"That's a good girl. But, Isabel, not engaged. Not, Isabel, engaged. There may be an understanding——"

"There is a definite engagement, papa. "Rudolph——"

"Rudolph?" cried Mr. Wildbore.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Well, Mr. Leyborne. He had no prospects six months ago and we cannot, of course, marry without your consent. But the moment he has enough money for the two of us, I will do it. Though I would rather do it with your consent, of course."

"You are very headstrong, Isabel."

"In December our promise to you will not hold any longer and I shall not renew it. I was an idiot ever to make it. It is simply ridiculous to be engaged to a man to whom one may not speak or even write. Only, papa, you may be sure that I shall wait for him, if I wait all my life."

"I had hoped," said her father, "that you had forgotten all about him."

"Well, you were wrong," said Isabel. "Papa, please don't let us go over all this again. I shall be sorry to leave you alone with mamma, only I must remind you that *you* have only yourself to thank. *I*, on the other hand, was not consulted and you can't blame me if I seek my own happiness—rather than your modified misery."

"You must not talk like that," said Mr. Wild-

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## MR. BAGSHAW INTERVENES

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bore, with a nervous look towards the mulberry tree. "It is very wicked."

"I am only sorry that it should be true," said his daughter.

"Your mother," said Mr. Wildbore, "is a splendid woman. She is President of twenty philanthropic societies."

"We can do no good discussing mamma," said Isabel. "But don't I hear her calling for you?"

"She has discovered," cried Mr. Wildbore, and darted out through the French window.

"I wonder what he means," thought Isabel.

Mr. Wildbore's fears were groundless. His wife wished only to know what kept him from bringing her spectacles. The bag still hung from the branch. He suffered under her acerbity while she adjusted the glasses on her imperious nose, and then he suddenly felt that the suspense was to be endured no longer.

"Clarinda," he burst forth, "I must speak to you."

"My dear Willy!" said the lady in surprise, pausing with her hand on the fatal bag.

"Clarinda—let me tell you all——"

"You know that I am anxious to work," she

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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said. "But if you have anything to say which presses, I am willing to listen to you." She leant back, folded her hands once more and waited.

Mr. Wildbore drew a deep breath.

A loud shout attracted their attention. A rustic of the most ferocious aspect, with scarlet face and streaming hair, armed with a tin bread-pan on which, as he ran, he beat with a poker, was rushing towards them over the lawn. Mrs. Wildbore started to her feet. Mr. Wildbore threw himself in front of his wife. They were aware of a tremendous humming sound which seemed to fill the whole world and a dark golden shimmering cloud hurled itself through the air straight at their heads.

The next instant the bees had swarmed. On the bag.

The rustic halted at their side. "Lar!" said he. "What a chaäse they bees a' given I!" He accompanied his words with several tremendous bangs on the bread-pan.

Mr. and Mrs. Wildbore clung together, expecting they knew not what.

People were rushing from all directions. From the house came Mrs. Tichborne, her hands all

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## MR. BAGSHAW INTERVENES

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flour. From the farm-yard came Mr. Tichborne, followed by Joe, the handy man. Isabel came dashing from the sitting-room. Excitement was in every face.

And bees were everywhere.

"Bide still thayer," commanded the rustic. "Bide still, then, an' let they drah ter the queen."

The others soon came up and formed an interested group near the pendulous swarm.

"A lucky place, sure 'nough," the man went on. "We'll highve they easy as ever. 'Tis a lil bag they be on, then. Well, I be gormed!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Wildbore. "That is my bag. I insist on those bees being removed."

"My ole 'oman'll be along 'ere soon, mum. Her's follerin' with the highve," said the bee-man. "Us'll move they bees right smart whan her do come."

"I decline to have those creatures on my bag another instant," said Mrs. Wildbore. "Drive them away, please, at once."

"Wot?" cried the bee-man. "An' they swahmed that beaufidul on the lil bag an' all?"

"I happen to require the bag," said Mrs. Wildbore. "They must be removed."



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Move 'em yerseluf," said the bee-man rudely. To his limited intelligence Mrs. Wildbore's request seemed that of a lunatic.

"Willy, remove those bees."

"Shouldn't advise 'ee ter try, master," said the bee-man. "Let they sweat a while. Happen 'ee wants fer ter digh?"

"You hear, my love," bleated Mr. Wildbore, "it is highly dangerous to interfere with them."

In the face of the bee-man's warning Mrs. Wildbore could not insist. She turned to leave the spot, indignant.

A shrill cry brought all eyes round from the swarm.

A stout, short woman, in pink cotton print, was waddling towards them at the best pace of which her little legs were capable. On the back of her head was apparently a gigantic straw hat, and in the middle of it glowed her crimson face with glaring eyes. She made straight for the little group under the mulberry tree, and as she came she shrieked totally unintelligible Hampshire.

"My ole 'oman," said the bee-man. "Yur,

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## MR. BAGSHAW INTERVENES

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Thusy," he roared. "Looky smart, then—yur they be; an' easy as ever ter highve."

The woman came up and removed the edifice of straw from her head.

"Highve 'en, then." she said. "Highve 'en, Bill. Lar, then, if they don' swahm on a lil bag, then!"

She inverted the new hive on the ground beneath the swarm.

The bee-man laid hold of the branch and shook it vigorously. The clotted mass of bees fell into the hive. Instantly the bee-man and his wife raised it and set it upright. The swarm was hived. The bee-man thrust his poker under the edge of the hive, thus lifting one end of the structure half an inch from the ground, and towards the opening so formed the bees not already inside began to crawl over the grass in a shining stream. The bag, however, was still covered with them.

"Nicely," observed Mr. Tichborne. "I rackon 'ee's gat queen in thayer."

"Ah!" said the bee-man. "See they drah to 'er. 'Tis beaudiful, sure!"

"And how long," asked Mrs. Wildbore, "am I to wait for my bag?"

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"They bees won't stay on he long now," said Mr. Tichborne. "Joe," he added, "set the lady's bag by the highve, then." And this was done.

And now the little thing came rolling on to the scene. From it Leyborne hailed Mrs. Tichborne, who, with her husband and Joe, left the group by the mulberry tree and ran over to greet the new guests. The others remained to stare, fascinated, at the bees on the grass.

"What's going on?" asked Leyborne.

"'Tis only a swahm, blaz 'ee," said Mr. Tichborne, as he began to unload the little thing of the luggage. "Highved beaudiful, 'er be. Glad ter welcome 'ee ter Mulberry, Mr. Leyborne. This your friend, I rackon. Bill Bagshaw, 'e've come after they beeses best paht mile an' they did swahm on Mrs. Wildbore's lil bag. Tole 'er pore 'usband ter take 'em off. Ho! ho! 'twere figherish good, that were. An' 'ow be 'ee, Mr. Leyborne, then? An' wayer 'ee been all this time? 'Remove they beeses,' 'er say; an' 'ee should a seen Mr. Wildbore's face. Didn' fancy job, I rackon. An' glad us be ter see 'ee, Mr. Leyborne, isn't us, Susan?"

"Come on, Bouverie," said Leyborne. "We

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## MR. BAGSHAW INTERVENES

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must see this. It's a great sight. Think! Twenty thousand bees all sticking together and crawling all over the shop."

Bouverie seemed with an unsteady hand to clear cobwebs from in front of his eyes.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, "I think I'll go and lie down, old boy. Rathah jolted up, you know, by—you know what. If—Mrs. Tichborne, isn't it? (Relative of claimant? No?). Well, if Mrs. Tichborne'll show me my room I'll have a bit of a nap, if I can. Anyhow, I don't want to see a lot of beastly bees crawlin' about."

He disappeared into the house in the wake of Mrs. Tichborne.

Leyborne picked up the bag whose contents had so shockingly affected Mr. Bouverie, with the intention of bestowing it carefully in his room. As he entered the hall a shrill cry came from the direction of the mulberry tree.

"Thayer!" said Mr. Tichborne, who stood by the little thing exchanging views on apiculture with Mr. Green. "Her's got it. Rackoned that'd 'appen if her stayed thayer. Mrs. Wildbore be stung, sur," he reported pleasantly.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"Mrs. Wildbore!" cried Leyborne. "This is too good to be true." He dropped the bag on to the nearest hall chair and ran out of the house. Next instant he was by Mrs. Wildbore's side.

"You are stung," he said. "Permit me, as a medical man, to alleviate your suffering. Take my arm, Mrs. Wildbore—let me assist you to your room. Be perfectly calm. On the lobe of the ear, I see. Ah! we shall set that right very quickly. Mr. Tichborne,"—the farmer had come up—"will you ask your wife to give me a little common washing-blue. A homely remedy, Mrs. Wildbore, but there is nothing better. I suppose if the whole contents of a chemist's shop were at my disposal I could find no prophylactic which would more readily assuage your pain."

Thus babbling he led the afflicted lady across the lawn.

But concerned, as he appeared, to the exclusion of every other thought, with the accident which had befallen Mrs. Wildbore, he had by no means failed to observe, on the ground by the mulberry tree and swarming with bees, the exact likeness of the bag which he had a moment earlier left on a chair in the entrance hall.

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## MR. BAGSHAW INTERVENES

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Nor had he failed to add this discovery to certain other bits of information of which he had recently become possessed and from the process to draw certain conclusions eminently satisfactory to himself.

Disease beats down all barriers. In its presence the petty distinctions which we human beings draw between each other vanish like so many whiffs of smoke. The healer—however humble his origin, however undesired (in our health) his company may be, becomes, when sickness appears, supreme. Let a wart afflict the Emperor on his throne—on his finger, perhaps one should have said—and the cottager's son (given that he is a qualified physician) is welcomed to the awful bedside. The lay mind recognises its own impotence to grapple with the mysterious foe, abandons the sham of superiority, and the doctor pockets his fee.

Mrs. Wildbore with a bee-sting in her ear was a very different person from the Mrs. Wildbore of fifteen minutes earlier. Her disaster was Leyborne's opportunity and he seized it resolutely. In the shortest possible space of time he had the whole establishment on the move, fetching the

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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blue bag, cotton handkerchiefs, warm water, smelling-salts, needle and thread, and half a dozen other things for which he had no use whatever, but which he ordered, as they came into his head, with a profusion and recklessness of expense eminently satisfactory to his patient. She thought: "An able young man. A young man who knows how to act promptly. A young man who appreciates me. A young man who does not pooh-pooh and make light of my pain." She had forgotten that he was on ill terms with his father.

"There is no danger, doctor?" she asked faintly, as he laid her down tenderly on the sitting-room sofa.

"I am happy to say," he replied, "none. But"—he paused dramatically—"an inch lower down and," he concluded in a hushed voice, "the carotid artery would have been affected."

Mrs. Wildbore was convinced that her escape from death had been nothing short of miraculous.

Then Leyborne set to work. The table was littered by this time with an assemblage of necessary and unnecessary articles. He was hard put to it to bring into actual employment more than the saucer of blue and the tweezers with which

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## MR. BAGSHAW INTERVENES

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he extracted the sting. But his ingenuity was equal to the task. By making a little pad of the red flannel, cutting with the scissors three cotton handkerchiefs into strips for a bandage, dabbing the lobe with the warm water on the sponge, sewing the bandage and pad in place with the needle and thread, laving the patient's temples with the eau-de-Cologne, holding the smelling-salts under her nose, and inflating the air pillow and placing it under her head, he made such a job of it that Isabel was transported with admiration for his resource.

Mrs. Wildbore lay on the sofa, pale but collected, enduring all things at his hands and firmly persuaded that he was the kindest and most capable holder of the Conjoint Qualification alive.

"Now," said Leyborne, when he had done his worst, "perfect quiet is recommended. I will draw the blinds. Try to obtain a little sleep, and then, if in half an hour the inflammation is found to be lessening, we will perhaps be able," he concluded in his best bedside manner, "to enjoy a cup of beef tea and a custard pudding."

"But," said Mrs. Wildbore, "I have to attend



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a meeting this evening in the village. I have a speech to make. May I not look it over?"

"Impossible, my dear Mrs. Wildbore."

"But I must attend the meeting. I cannot disappoint my audience. The curate tells me that the schoolroom will be crowded."

"Well," said Leyborne diplomatically, "we will see. We will see. I hope you may go. You shall—yes—if I can possibly allow it."

"Isabel might read the speech over to me."

"My dear Mrs. Wildbore," said Leyborne, "I beg you to dismiss from your mind all thought of your speech. This is your best chance of making it. Forgive me for insisting, but your daughter must not read the speech over to you. Perfect quiet for the patient is indicated."

He drew the blind over the French window, lingered for a second to touch the bandage lightly, and opening the door for Isabel and Mr. Wildbore, followed them out into the hall.

Mrs. Wildbore composed herself to rest.

Common sense, a powerful will, the belief that a man is on ill terms with his father—what are these when pitted against a little soothing chatter from a possessor of the Conjoint Qualification?

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## CHAPTER XII

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### Undutiful Conduct of a Daughter

**M**R. WILDBORE, at no time a very prominent figure, had during the occurrences of the last ten minutes shrunk almost to the vanishing point. But now we must allow him to take the stage again. The situation by which Leyborne had so readily profited had arisen so suddenly that the poor old gentleman had found himself utterly unprepared to cope with the strenuous young doctor. Impotent, he had been forced to witness Leyborne advancing by leaps and bounds in the favour of Mrs. Wildbore. Torn between his eagerness to possess himself of the bag the moment it should be free of bees and his terror of the favourable impression which Leyborne was evidently making on his wife, he knew not which way to move. But his fear of seeing Isabel married, and all that that meant, forced him to accompany the two young people and Mrs. Wildbore to the house, and of

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all that transpired in the sitting-room he had been a silent, raging and tremulous spectator. Once in the hall, however, he found himself again endowed with speech.

"Sir," he said to Leyborne in a harsh whisper, "this must stop. I do not desire that you should renew your acquaintance with my wife."

"I don't think," said Leyborne, also in a low voice, "that Mrs. Wildbore would be flattered by the imputation that she looks to you for guidance in the matter of her friendships."

"If you become intimate with my wife, sir, you must see more of my daughter than I can possibly permit. How, pray, do you propose to keep your promise to me that you will not speak to Isabel?"

"I have already pointed out the difficulty of the situation," replied Leyborne. "But of this you may be sure, Mr. Wildbore: the promise will be kept. I do not, you observe, speak to Isabel, nor does Isabel speak to me." He took the girl's arm and led her out into the carriage-drive. "Here," he said, "we can talk in more comfort. A heated discussion (which this promises to be),

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conducted in a whisper, is inimical to the vocal chords, besides being supremely ridiculous.

"Drop my daughter's arm, sir," said Mr. Wildbore.

"There was nothing in our agreement," said Leyborne, "about my not holding Belle's arm. Verbal and epistolary communication only are barred. It is possible, Mr. Wildbore, to convey a great deal without saying it. Words have their uses, but they are not in it, for certain purposes, with other forms of language. For instance," and here he openly pressed Isabel's hand, "that simple little action signifies to one who understands it rightly the whole of the following: 'I love you as I loved you six months ago, as I shall love you when I die, be it a hundred years hence. I am quite undismayed by your father's hostility, and quite determined to capture your mother's goodwill. I am now, by the death of my father, in a perfectly independent position, and six months hence I shall expect you to marry me, entirely regardless of your parents' opposition. Earlier than that our married happiness would be handicapped by the promise of silence made to your father, which we are bound to ob-

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serve.' You see, sir," he concluded, "that I am careful to address my remarks strictly to yourself." As he spoke, he began to stroll up and down upon the drive, Isabel willingly accompanying him.

Mr. Wildbore's eyes dilated with rage, his face was suffused with colour, that is to say he had grown a delicate pink all over from the crown of his dome-like head to the junction of his neck with his turn-down collar. "Your audacity, sir," he said, keeping pace with the others, "staggers me, sir. Staggers me."

"Now, Mr. Wildbore," said Leyborne, "your daughter can similarly, by a single pressure of my hand, convey to me all of what follows: 'I am prepared to do as you wish. I am confident that your means are large enough to provide for my comfort. You are the only man with whom I can be happy, and in December I will be yours.'"

Whereupon Isabel squeezed Leyborne's hand.

"Isabel," said Mr. Wildbore, "I entreat you—I command you—no, I entreat you, Isabel, to leave that fellow's side."

"How can I, papa," said Isabel, "when he is holding me so tight?"

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## UNDUTIFUL CONDUCT

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"And you, sir," said Mr. Wildbore, "I command you to release my daughter."

"It only remains," said Leyborne, halting suddenly, "to put a stamp on the contract," and before the horrified eyes of Mr. Wildbore he kissed Isabel three times on the mouth.

"Very good," said Mr. Wildbore, turning away deliberately. "I shall tell your mother."

"Will you at the same time," said Leyborne terribly, over his shoulder, "tell her what you brought back from London in your bag?"

The effect of these words upon Mr. Wildbore was alarming. His righteous indignation had caused him to swell out into the semblance of manhood. Leyborne's simple question collapsed him. The fine colour sank out of his face; his clothes seemed suddenly to wrinkle on his body as if he had shrunk two inches in every measurement; he emitted a little gasping sound and came running back.

"W-w-what did you say?" he stammered. "How did you know?"

"Never mind how I know," said Leyborne, "I *do* know. Oh, Mr. Wildbore, that you should so disgrace that ribbon in your coat."

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"I swear," shrieked Mr. Wildbore, "that I am the victim of some dreadful accident. When I left town there was nothing but my wife's speeches in the bag."

"Oh, papa," cried Isabel, carefully refraining from addressing Leyborne, "what have you been doing with mamma's speeches? What have you been doing to disgrace that ribbon in your coat?"

"Nothing—nothing whatever," cried Mr. Wildbore. "Does my own child desert me? Do you, Isabel, think that it is true?"

"I don't know what to think, papa," she said. "But why are you so agitated?"

"If you knew one tithe of what I have had to endure to-day," said her father, "you would marvel that I am not out of my senses."

"Well," said Isabel, as she reluctantly disengaged her arm from Leyborne's, "I must go and change my dress. But before I go, will you, papa, ask Mr. Leyborne how long he proposes to stay here?"

"No," snapped her father. "No, I will not."

"Will you then," said Leyborne, "be so good as to tell Isabel that I expect to be here a week at least. If necessary longer. But I hope to gain

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Mrs. Wildbore's esteem very rapidly. Please say all this to Isabel."

"I will do nothing of the kind," retorted Mr. Wildbore. "And let me tell you that you shall advance not one step farther with my wife. I will tell her all about you. She shall learn that the kind and solicitous young doctor is only after her daughter's money."

"That is a charge," said Leyborne, "which you have never made before and you know it is not true. Perhaps your heat is excusable—if so, one must make allowances for what it leads you to say. But come, a bargain. Do you give us back our promise and I will undertake to suppress my knowledge of the contents of your bag."

Mr. Wildbore looked towards the mulberry tree. The bee-man and his wife were still standing by their hive. But he judged that the bag would soon be free of bees. If he could get hold of it——

"I defy you," he said, as he began to move in its direction. "I will never give you back that promise."

"Then," said Leyborne, falling into step with him, "another bargain. Let us three go to Mrs.



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Wildbore. You shall tell her all about Isabel and me and I will tell her all about you."

"We have nothing to conceal, papa," said Isabel, "and I'm sure mamma will forgive you when she realizes that Rudolph is independent. And he is a dear, you know."

"While," said Leyborne, "Mrs. Wildbore cannot be seriously angry with such a darling as Belle. You might just mention to her, will you, that I love her?"

"And please, papa, assure Rudolph that he is the only man I shall ever care for."

"I will not," cried Mr. Wildbore, wheeling round and facing them. "I will not remain here to be the medium for this sentimental twaddle, which is a plain evasion of your agreement."

"Nay," said Leyborne, "whom than yourself can I more fittingly make the confidant of my adoration for your daughter?"

"And," cried Isabel, as she went through the porch into the hall, "surely a girl may tell her own father that she is in love?"

"You are every bit as good as the post," said Leyborne.

He paused to follow Isabel up the stairs with

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his eyes and at the same moment perceived on one of the hall chairs (where he himself had placed it) the bag which he had taken from Bouverie in the little thing. Mr. Wildbore had passed on towards the mulberry tree.

Leyborne from where he stood on the drive could see that the bag stood half open. In a second he was through the door and had the thing in his hands. One glance into it was enough to show him that the snake was gone. Well, the reptile had done its work with Bouverie and was welcome to its liberty. But for the speeches he had a definite use. As he stood there considering how he should dispose of them, a smothered shriek attracted his attention to the door of the sitting-room, which was ajar. He looked into the room.

A minute later he darted once more out of the house and, dropping the bag behind a thick clump of sweet william, raced round the corner to the sitting-room window.

Why he did so shall now be made manifest.

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## CHAPTER XIII

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### The Inebriate Is Sworn In

**F**OR some time after Mrs. Tichborne had piloted him to his bedroom, Mr. Bouverie had lain on his bed, with closed eyes, vainly endeavouring to pull himself together. His recent experience had upset his balance completely. Like every one else who persists in foolish courses in despite of his own better judgment, he had always told himself that an exception would be made in his case; that the fate which met other people would pass him by; that, in short, the laws of Nature would be suspended for his benefit. He had never faced the question: Why should this happen? He had not always been without fear; but hope had invariably triumphed over it. A hundred times he had resolved to pull up; a hundred times his resolution had weakened into going slow; and once he had begun to go slow he had found himself inevitably going fast. Each time that he had become more in-

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capacitated than usual, he had sworn off alcohol; and each time a little reflection had brought the comforting assurance that one more glass wouldn't make any difference. He had certainly consumed a vast quantity of spirits since, eighteen months earlier, his inheritance had come to him; but not more than thousands of weak-minded young men swallowed without attaining the crowning distinction of an attack of delirium tremens. Yet the terror of the disorder had always lurked in the background, an unwelcome shadow over his merriest revels. It is needless to say that he had never seen a case and had only the vaguest idea of the disease's symptoms. But he believed devoutly that pink reptiles were an essential accompaniment to any manifestation of it.

And now Nemesis had come upon him without warning given. He had got them.

So he lay there not daring to open his eyes lest some horrid apparition should sit leering at him from the foot of his bed, and the darkness into which he stared was peopled with nameless and formless fears. He must surely have worked himself into a condition of hysteria had he not grown suddenly bored. The large and healthy

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body which housed his trembling soul got tired of lying inert on a bed on such a glorious afternoon and called loudly to be taken out and exercised. This is to say that he began to suffer from the fidgets. Although the restlessness of his limbs only confirmed him in his worst fears, he found it impossible to lie still any longer, and, rising cautiously from his couch (not without a hunted look or two into the darker corners of the room), he plunged his face into cold water, and feeling much better, opened the door and descended the stairs. His intention was simply to stroll and take the air.

In the hall, on a chair, reposed a yellow bag.

Keeping his eyes firmly fixed on it, he skirted round the farther side of the hall and gained the porch. Here he paused, inhaling the sweet air, and continuing all the while to regard the bag with large eyes.

"There it is," he said to himself, "and it looks all right. And I feel all right, which is funny if I've got 'em. Always thought you had 'em all the time, but I've seen nothing more—nothing whatever. In fact, I feel absolutely topping at the present moment. I wonder if that's usual.

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I must ask Leyborne. But he'd tell me it was. Thinks me a silly ass, Leyborne does, and ready to swallow anything. Shouldn't wonder if he was kiddin' me about my seein' that snake. He'd do that likely enough just to terrify me an' get me in his power. Don't believe I ever saw it. Some of these doctors are awful scamps, an' what do I know about Leyborne? Anyhow, I'm goin' to have a look for myself. If I see it again, I'm no worse than I was before, and I'll have a tin of cigarettes, anyhow, if it blinds me."

He approached the bag cautiously, and standing as far back as he could, pressed the catch. The bag half opened. Bouverie waited.

"Nothin'," he said. "He was kiddin' me and I'll tell him what I think of him first, an' go back to town this blessed evening."

As he spoke the blind-worm put out its head. Mr. Bouverie's nerve again deserted him. He uttered a groan and started backwards. His body came into violent collision with a door, which burst open and let him through on to the floor in a sitting posture. The back of his head struck, at the same time, an occasional table, and the room was strewn with family photographs, a

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shell-covered box, a mother-of-pearl paperknife, a woollen mat in five violent colours, a China baby, a glass bull's-eye with a coloured view of Plymouth Hoe under it, a green glass vase filled with everlasting flowers, a wooden penholder with a microscopic photograph on glass of the Ten Commandments set in the handle, and a paper fan which bore the words, worked across it in gold tinsel, "Souvenir of Bognor." The scene was temporarily blacked out for Mr. Bouverie, but instantly a fine display of brilliant lights succeeded the darkness, and these in their turn faded until nothing met his gaze, when he at last scrambled to his knees, but the indignant features of a British matron, who sat upright on the sofa doing her best to look dignified under the terrible handicap of a white bandage fastened jauntily across the top part of her head.

"What is this, sir?" demanded Mrs. Wildbore. "What horseplay is this?"

"I've seen it again," said Bouverie in a thin voice. "Leyborne was right. I've got 'em."

"Got what?" cried Mrs. Wildbore.

"The jumps," exclaimed Bouverie. "The hor-

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rors. D.T.'s, you know. I thought it was a mistake, but it isn't."

"Are you Dr. Leyborne's friend?"

"Yes. I was wrong about him. Leyborne's all right, and I'll never touch another drop of drink, so help me bob."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Wildbore, "he is looking after you. He is your doctor. He has brought you down here to cure you. You are a drunkard."

"Yes," said Bouverie, "at least I suppose I was or I wouldn't have got 'em. But not any more, thank you. Once is enough for Ernest." (This, it may be mentioned, was Mr. Bouverie's most inappropriate baptismal name.)

"Miserable young man!" cried Mrs. Wildbore. "Of what do you accuse yourself?"

"It's a thing," said Bouverie, apologetically, "that might happen to anybody." He got on to his feet and stood rubbing the back of his head, while he regarded the wreckage on the floor with the eye of a connoisseur.

"Here's a fine lot of hay," he remarked.

"Do I understand," said Mrs. Wildbore, "that you have brought yourself, by your excesses, to



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that horrible condition which you have mentioned? You seem very young."

"Yes," said Bouverie, not without a touch of pride, "ain't I? But it'll last me a lifetime. Funny thing, though. I *feel* all right. But I've seen it twice. Yes, I've got 'em, hot and peppery. What do you suppose I'd better do for it?"

Mrs. Wildbore began to fish about among her petticoats, and suddenly produced a little, long book. She believed in striking iron while it is hot.

"Here," she said, "is your only remedy." She detached a fountain pen from her chatelaine, and laid pen and book on the table at her side. Then she put her feet to the floor to make room for Bouverie on the sofa, opened the book, and said, "Come and sign."

"What's that?" asked Bouverie suspiciously.

"The Pledge," she said. "Sign it. Now. If you hesitate you're lost."

"Not if I know it," said Bouverie. "That's only for Sunday-school kids and drunkards."

"And what, pray, are you?"

"I'm a gentleman," said Bouverie simply.

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## THE INEBRIATE IS SWORN IN

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"D'you know anything about this Gold Cure?"

"Put not your trust," said Mrs. Wildbore, "in quack nostrums. Believe me, my dear young man, there is only one cure for you: The Pledge."

"I've heard about it," said Bouverie, "but never seen it." He picked up the book and glanced apprehensively at the words which met his eye.

"I promise," he read, "'by Divine assistance, to abstain from all intoxicating liquors as beverages.' Does that include gin?" he asked. "Gin's a teetotal drink, ain't it?"

"No," said Mrs. Wildbore firmly, "it is not. Nor cider, either."

"Well, come," Bouverie bargained, "you'll allow a fellow a Pilsner, eh?"

"Certainly not. Sign, sign, young man. Here lies your sole chance of safety."

"Do you mean," asked Bouverie, her earnestness and the terror, fresh upon him, of his own condition causing him to waver, "that if I sign that I shall be all right?"

"So long as you keep it," said Mrs. Wildbore.

"Ah!" thought Bouverie. He re-read the formula. "'Promise to abstain,'" he meditated.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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"That's all. It says nothing about how long. Why, it don't bind me to a single thing! Might give it a trial, eh? Can't do any harm, and expect it'd please the old girl." He was always ready to oblige, was Bouverie.

"All right," he announced. "Where do I sign?"

Next moment the Cause of 'Temperance was the richer by a new recruit.

Mrs. Wildbore was delighted with her success. "To-night, Mr.—ah—Bouverie, isn't it?" she said, peering at his signature, "you shall come to the meeting and hear me speak. And that reminds me. Will you be so good as to fetch some papers which you will find lying under the mulberry tree on the lawn? They are in a bag."

The imperious nature of Mrs. Wildbore could no longer—her alarm was half an hour old—brook the prohibitions of her medical adviser. "A yellow leather bag," she concluded.

Bouverie made no reply. He was staring fearfully at the bottom of the door. It had swung back, after his precipitate entrance, and now stood about three inches open. Through this space a serpent was crawling.

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## THE INEBRIATE IS SWORN IN

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"Look!" he whispered, pointing a shaking finger at the reptile. "There it is again. And you swore to me that if I signed I should be all right."

"I see nothing," said Mrs. Wildbore with perfect truth. She and the table were so placed that the snake was at present hidden from her sight. "What do you think you see?"

"A snake," said Bouverie. "It isn't there, of course. I know that. But I wish it wouldn't follow me about."

"Ah!" cried the lady, "let this be a warning to you, poor dear young man. Let this——" She broke off, and turned pale. Ah!" she cried. "A snake!"

"You see it, too?" asked Bouverie. "Then *you've* got 'em. Oh, you old hypocrite!"

And now Mrs. Wildbore performed an action which can only be described as heroic. She could not doubt the evidence of her senses. A snake was certainly wiggling towards her over the carpet, and a very horrible one, too. But with a stroke of that extraordinary gift of feminine intuition, about which we read so much, she leapt in a breath to the knowledge of what she must

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do. Here was a young man in a pitiable condition, soil ripe for the reception of the good seed. He suffered from a delusion, not that he saw a snake which was not really there, but that he really did not see a snake which was there. How he came to imagine this did not concern her. The only vital point to remember was this. A word from her, which might destroy his belief in the creature's unsubstantiality, would infallibly undo all the good hitherto accomplished. Let her betray her knowledge, and he would tear up the pledge and return to his abandoned courses. The fiction at all costs must be maintained. He had accused her of suffering from delirium tremens. He had called her a hypocrite. No matter. She must not resent his language. The snake was coming directly towards her. No matter. She must sit still.

She forced her feet, which had of their own accord begun to ascend towards the seat of the sofa, down to the floor.

"I see nothing," she said firmly, as the snake headed away from her.

"Do you swear that?" he cried.

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"I swear it," she said in a less confident voice. The snake had turned her way.

"Do you deny," whispered Bouverie, "that it isn't going straight towards you? It's by the rug now. Why, hang it! it's not ten inches from your boot."

"Nothing," said Mrs. Wildbore faintly.

"It's gone right past you," he said. "I see it distinctly. Oh, Lor, what a state I'm in! I've never had such a go as this. I'm getting much worse. There! it's by the window."

"This only shows," said Mrs. Wildbore, still breathing with some difficulty, "what a mercy it is that you came to me."

"Haven't got much good out of it yet," said Bouverie ungratefully. "It's goin' through the window. Dash its skin, how real it is!"

Under a sudden impulse of hatred, he picked up a blotting-pad from the table (it was Mrs. Wildbore's) and hurled it at the disappearing snake. It missed the snake, but knocked over another occasional table, whence were precipitated to the floor a stuffed bullfinch under a glass dome, a woollen mat in ten violent colours, an aneroid barometer which had been pointed to

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Very Stormy for the last seven years, a green glass vase filled with paper chrysanthemums, a pincushion formed by stuffing the interior of a large fresh-water mussel, an inkstand in blue glass (the contents of which had fortunately evaporated) a prism cut in one angle and painted to represent a vase of flowers, a wooden penholder with a microscopic photograph on glass of ten views taken in the neighbourhood of Ventnor set in the handle, an elephant, minus its trunk, six inches high and made of earthenware, another elephant in grey velvet, intended originally for pins, but now raised to the dignity of a decoration, and a brown china teapot, cracked, and bearing on its side the sound piece of advice, "Ca' canny."

The snake passed between the threshold of the French window and the bottom of the blind and so vanished from sight.

The relief which this circumstance occasioned in Mrs. Wildbore's bosom was so great that she would have cared nothing though Mr. Bouverie had distributed ten times as many objects of prime inutility over the carpet of the parlour as he had; but it annoyed her that he should have laid hands upon her blotter.

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## THE INEBRIATE IS SWORN IN

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"Idiot!" she exclaimed testily. "Don't I tell you there's nothing there. And now, see what you've done!"

"Yes," said Bouverie, surveying the wreckage, "this seems to be my lucky day, doesn't it? But the great and really important thing is that the snake's gone. You saw it go, didn't you? I mean, it is gone, isn't it?"

"There was no snake," said Mrs. Wildbore.

"Quite so," said Bouverie, "quite so, of course. However, just to make sure"—he went to the window, pulled the blind aside and peered apprehensively forth.

"Hullo!" he cried. "Here's old Leyborne. "Leyborne," he enquired, his voice acquiring a sudden assurance from the comforting proximity of his medical adviser, "you didn't see that confounded snake of mine, did you?"

"Certainly not," said Leyborne, who stood in the path a yard or so from the window, one hand plunged deep into the pocket of his Norfolk jacket. "How could I?"

"You mean that it didn't go out through this window a moment ago?"

"Certainly not," said Leyborne again.



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"Well, you'd have seen it, if it had," said Bouverie, "wouldn't you?"

"Certainly *not*," said Leyborne for the third time emphatically. "But," he went on, grabbing suddenly in an odd fashion at something or other in his pocket, "excuse me a moment, Bouverie. I want something out of my room. I'll be down directly." With these words he left Mr. Bouverie planted and disappeared round the corner of the house, running.

"Uncivil devil, Leyborne," muttered Bouverie. "Dashed uncivil person. And what sort of a blooming doctor does he *call* himself? Refuses to discuss symptoms with a fellow. Down directly, he says, and bolts off just as I was getting ready to describe this last go of 'em that I've had. Suppose there's no doubt about it, this time. Leyborne *must* have seen it, if it had been real. And he didn't, and she," he jerked his head backwards, "didn't. Only possible conclusion—I didn't. Well, all I say is, that if her blessed pledge can't do any more'n that for a fellow, it isn't worth keeping."

"Mr. Bouverie," called Mrs. Wildbore from within the room, "perhaps you will be so kind

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## THE INEBRIATE IS SWORN IN

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as to fetch the bag I spoke to you about now. It's by the mulberry tree. A small, square, yellow bag. You can't mistake it." For the moment, she felt, she had done as much for Mr. Bouverie as could be expected of her. But, for herself, time pressed.

"Delighted," said Bouverie, always ready to oblige. He turned his eyes towards the mulberry tree and surprised Mr. Wildbore in the act of stooping to pick up a bag in which, to his certain knowledge, reposed five hundred of his cigarettes, and a bottle of brandy, bought and paid for by him, Bouverie.

How it had got to the mulberry tree from the hall he did not pause to consider. The bag was his property; the snake was not in it any longer and he meant to have it.

He uttered a loud cry, and set off running toward the mulberry tree.

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## CHAPTER XIV

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### Mr. Wildbore Is Again Foiled

**M**R. WILDBORE, a prey to several evil emotions, left Leyborne gazing sentimentally after Isabel and walked directly across the lawn to the mulberry tree. The bee-man and his wife took no notice of his arrival, so deeply occupied were they with the delicate operation of placing the hive, which by this time contained nearly all the swarm, upon a wheelbarrow.

The bag lay on the grass, close to the barrow. There were still one or two bees on it.

"Give me that bag," said Mr. Wildbore abruptly. "Take those bees off it, and give it to me."

Policy would have counselled a more ingratiating manner, but Mr. Wildbore was not in a mood to listen to her voice.

"Eh?" said the bee-man, looking up from his business.

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## MR. WILDBORE IS AGAIN FOILED

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"The bag, I say," cried Mr. Wildbore. Irritated beyond his power of self-command by the small delay, he stamped his foot.

There are born into this world every year perhaps three persons, all beautiful women, who can stamp their feet without looking ridiculous. Whether Mr. Wildbore was more or less suited for the indulgence of this exercise I leave the reader to judge. The effect, however, upon the bee-woman was instant. She burst into a fit of unrestrained merriment, in which her husband presently joined.

Surely this day Mr. Wildbore was unfortunate in his bucolic encounters, for the peasantry of Hampshire is well known to be the most civil in England.

"What are you laughing at?" he cried, losing all sense of dignity. "How dare you laugh?"

"Wot fer do us laff?" said the bee-man. "Rackon 'ee'd make a cat laff. But don't 'ee come near this yer highve, master. Happen 'ee does, they bees'll ate 'ee, sure."

He proceeded with his task. Mr. Wildbore, his eyes upon the bag, waited for the removal of the hive, with what patience he could command.

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So earnestly did he regard the bag that he failed to observe Mr. Leyborne come running round the corner of the house, stoop quickly to the flower bed by the parlour window, pick up something and place it in his pocket. Very shortly afterwards the bee-man and his wife, without a word of farewell (for which piece of incivility Mr. Wildbore readily forgave them), departed with their property.

At once Mr. Wildbore approached the bag. At last he stood over it. There was not a single bee upon it. It was within his grasp. He stooped to pick it up. A loud shout broke the silence of the afternoon. Mr. Wildbore cast a fearful glance around him and discovered that a young man was running towards him across the lawn from the house. In him Mr. Wildbore recognised with loathing the odious person of the Station Inn. But he was too busy to concern himself as to how the youth got here.

The bag lay on the ground—at his mercy.

He snatched it up and turned to flee into the woods. He had not carried it a dozen yards before he heard a howl of "Gone away!" and feet thundered in pursuit.

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## MR. WILDBORE IS AGAIN FOILED

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A heavy hand fell on his arm. A cheery voice sounded in his ear.

"Why, it's Old Cockalorum who kissed the barmaid!"

Mr. Wildbore turned, positively grinning with fury. "Be silent, you young brute," he gasped. "My wife is in the house."

"Lucky she wasn't in the bar," said Bouverie. "Shocking old boy! Where are you offin' with my bag?"

I must have wrought badly if the reader has formed any high estimate of Mr. Bouverie's intellectual nimbleness. The deductive effort necessary for grasping the situation was wholly beyond him. His only thought was that Mr. Wildbore was running away with cigarettes to the number of five hundred. And for a cigarette he was prepared to barter his chances of salvation. He had recently been much shaken.

"It is not your bag," cried Mr. Wildbore. "It is my bag."

The reader seated in comfort before the fire, his feet on the chimneypiece, and his pipe drawing sweetly, will ask: "Why in the name of imbecility didn't the old fool understand what had

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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happened, give up the confounded bag and thank his stars he was rid of it?" But let him think a moment. Had Mr. Wildbore read this book instead of figuring in some few of its scenes, he would have been as wise as the reader, and would have acted doubtless in accordance with the reader's admirable suggestion. But he knew nothing of any second bag. He knew only that he was at last in possession of what he sought, that the woods were near, and that yet another person wished to hinder him in his disposal of this dangerous property. The weasel in the trap does not often think collectedly.

"It is my bag," he repeated. "Go away!"

Suddenly Bouverie remembered that other matters besides cigarettes were connected with that bag. He recoiled, and his mental balance being very much unsettled, he said—

"All right. You can have the beastly thing. I don't want it. But the old lady does. Says it's got her speeches in it. *I* know better."

Mr. Wildbore threw up his arms as if to ward off a blow. Everybody seemed to share his dreadful secret.

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## MR. WILDBORE IS AGAIN FOILED

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"You know nothing about it, sir," he cried. "It does contain my wife's speeches."

"Never heard Three Star brandy called that before," said Bouverie jocularly.

"Brandy?" cried Mr. Wildbore. "Nothing of the sort. Nor cigarette boxes, either. How dare you suggest that my wife's bag contains brandy and cigarettes?"

"It's her bag, is it?" asked Bouverie. "You said it was yours, you know. Somebody's lyin'. I tell you what, old Kalamazoo," he added confidentially, drifting still farther than heretofore out of the touch with the rational, "it's my belief she's a secret drinkah. Horrible! What?"

"This bag contains her speeches," said Mr. Wildbore, ignoring this abominable suggestion.

"Well, she wants 'em," said Bouverie. "Where were you taking them? I believe you're a secret drinkah, too. Very good brandy. Three Star. A conoozer, that's what you are, you wicked old thing."

"There is nothing in here," cried Mr. Wildbore, "but Temperance addresses."

"What about the snake?" asked Bouverie,



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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whose mind now worked as the ideas came uppermost.

Mr. Wildbore glanced at him as at an apparition.

"The snake?" he repeated. This young man knew everything.

"Beg pardon," said Bouverie, "you wouldn't have seen that, of course. Besides, it went through the window."

"What do you know about the snake?" demanded Mr. Wildbore. "And what window?"

"You've seen it, too?" asked Bouverie eagerly.

"*Have* I seen it?" cried Mr. Wildbore.

"Where did *you* see it?"

"Ah!" said Bouverie, utterly at sea, "that explains everything."

"What does it explain?" asked Mr. Wildbore, who had now lost all initiative and could only follow where he was led.

"Why you were boltin' off with the brandy. You *are* a secret drinkah. Like your wife, eh?" "Runs in the family, what? You ought to sign the pledge like me, old Inky-Dinky, that's what you ought to do. Begad! we are a pair, aren't

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## MR. WILDBORE IS AGAIN FOILED

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we, you and I? Regular scorchers, that's what's the matter with us."

Mr. Wildbore began to wonder if there was not some truth in these atrocious charges. He stood speechless before his accuser.

"And you sportin' a blue ribbon, too!" Bouverie went on, shaking his head sorrowfully. "I'm surprised at you. I am really. I may be a poor drunkard, but I'm not a whited sepulchre. Well, I won't tell the missis. Honour among thieves, you know. There she is callin' you."

Mrs. Wildbore had hailed her husband from the sitting-room window.

"Pop off, old Thingummy," said Bouverie. "Take her speeches to her like a good boy. And don't forget the corkscrew."

Mrs. Wildbore came towards them. Mr. Wildbore stood rooted to the earth. Mrs. Wildbore took the bag from his palsied hands.

"Wilberforce and Mr. Bouverie," she said, "I cannot conceive why you prefer to stand chattering here to bringing me my speeches. It only shows that if you want a thing done you must do it yourself." She turned and began to walk to the house.

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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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Mr. Wildbore, as he trotted beside her, measured the distance which separated them from the duckpond. Yes, it could be done.

"Let me carry the bag," he said, and laying his hands on it, tried to wrest it from her grasp. One bold dash, one good heave to the centre, and the water would——

"No!" said Mrs. Wildbore decidedly. "This bag does not go out of my possession again. You are hurting my hand, Willy. Ah! Dr. Leyborne," she cried, as Leyborne came hurrying towards them. "You see," she held up the bag, "your patient has disobeyed orders. But I feel perfectly restored, and my duty, you know. A few minutes before tea-dinner, I entreat."

Leyborne took the bag from her hand in his masterful medical way.

"Let me carry it," he said. "Yes, I think we may go to the meeting if we are set on it. But there is the bell. You'll have time after the meal."

Mrs. Tichborne had come to the porch and was tolling a bell vigorously.

"Then let us lose no time," said Mrs. Wildbore. "Will you kindly put the bag in the sitting-room."

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## MR. WILDBORE IS AGAIN FOILED

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She passed into the house closely followed by Bouverie, who was generally ready for his meals. Leyborne and Mr. Wildbore were left together.

"Give me that bag," said Mr. Wildbore violently.

"Will you give me back my promise?"

"I detest you, sir," said Mr. Wildbore between his false teeth. "Isabel shall never be your wife."

"Oh, yes she will," said Leyborne cheerfully. "In December, you know. But meanwhile I have a lot to say to her, and your presence, while it is necessary to our interchange of ideas, is burdensome in the extreme."

"I defy you," said Mr. Wildbore. "Do your worst. I will tell Clarinda that it is all a horrible mistake."

"I won't press the matter now," said Leyborne. "But remember, I can put everything right. You have only to say the word. Think how much pleasanter it will be for you, Mr. Wildbore, to fall in with my suggestion. All anxiety will be removed from your mind. You will no longer have to play gooseberry to the interviews of your daughter and myself. You will be on the best of

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terms with your future son-in-law. The prospect is ideal."

"I defy you," said Mr. Wildbore again.

"Willy," said Mrs. Wildbore, putting her head out at the dining-room window, "we are waiting for you."

Mr. Wildbore went in to tea-dinner.

Leyborne, bag in hand, ran upstairs three steps at a time, to his own bedroom.

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## CHAPTER XV

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### Mr. Strongi'th'arm Refuses to say "Die"

**A**ND now," said Mrs. Wildbore, "I must positively run over the notes of my speech." She rose from the table, and left the room, followed by Isabel.

For a short time the three man sat in silence, which Leyborne did his best to enliven by whistling below his breath. Bouverie was asking himself why he had been such a blithering fool as to give up his cigarettes. Mr. Wildbore was engaged with still more gloomy thoughts. Even now, he surmised, Clarinda was opening the bag.

She opened the door instead, and his heart stopped beating.

"Clarinda," he cried, "I swear that I am not responsible."

"I have accused you of nothing, Willy," she said, "but your very premature denial is curious. It would lead me indeed to suppose that you are

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guilty of this disappearance, only that I left it with a trustworthy person. Where did you put my bag?" she asked Leyborne.

"Your bag?" said Leyborne. "I just put it down."

"Well, do you mind finding it for me? Time is passing, and the meeting begins in twenty minutes."

"Certainly," cried Leyborne, jumping up. "Certainly. Why," he cried, as he went out into the hall, "it's gone. Mr. Wildbore, have you seen it?" he called.

"Now, then, old Billy-oh!" said Bouverie sulkily. "You're wanted."

Mr. Wildbore's heart resumed the exercise of its functions. He was, it seemed, again reprieved. He hustled into the hall.

"What bag is that?" he asked cunningly.

"Willy," said his wife, "you talk as if the house was full of bags. Perhaps you have forgotten that you brought my speeches from London this morning, and what you brought them in? What have you done with the bag?"

"Nothing," cried Mr. Wildbore. "You left it with that man." He pointed at Leyborne. "I

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## REFUSES TO SAY "DIE"

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have been in the dining-room ever since. Haven't I?" he cried. Had any one answered him in the negative he would have taken their word for it without the slightest hesitation.

"Your air is very extraordinary," said his wife. "Pray have you any reason for wishing to conceal the thing?"

"Clarinda," cried Mr. Wildbore, "let me——"

"Find the bag first," she said. "I will hear your explanation afterwards."

"But Clarinda——"

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Wildbore, as the hall clock struck a quarter to seven, "don't stand gabbling there—search—look about. I must have it, Mr. Leyborne; what has happened to it? I am losing time. The meeting begins at seven. Find my bag, Mr. Leyborne. You are the only person here with any wits. Willy, bestir yourself."

"But Clarinda——"

"You'll drive me mad," she said. "*Will* you find my speeches? Look for them, Mr. Bouverie, I beg of you. Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

Mrs. Wildmore was completely upset. Why?

The way in which this practised speaker seemed to view the possible loss of her speeches was surely



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very remarkable. No doubt they were of great value to herself, as to the Cause of Temperance. The well-prepared notes of one speech are what no orator cares to lose, for of such is his stock-in-trade, and now that thirty or forty were in question, Mrs. Wildbore might be excused if she had displayed annoyance or even apprehension. But panic? No.

And she was in a panic. There could be no doubt of it. Her hands plucked nervously at the jet about the front of her gown. She had, in her distress, pulled off the bandage from her head, and the large blotch of blue on her ear showed in strong contrast to her pale face. Her very lips were white, and she babbled orders and entreaties indiscriminately to every one within earshot, with very little regard to their coherence. You would have supposed her faced with financial ruin or loss of character.

Yet nothing more formidable than a village temperance meeting menaced her.

Now a village meeting is not critical. Twenty minutes of straightforward, homely, extemporaneous talk would amply satisfy the demands and expectations of this one. The knowledge that

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it was Mrs. Wildbore who was addressing them would in itself make anything she chose to say extraordinary. Her name alone would be proof that the speech to which they would be listening was far above the usual. Was she not President of innumerable philanthropic societies?

But—a word in your ear. This must go no farther, as you are a gentleman. Mrs. Wildbore was incapable of twenty minutes' extemporaneous talk, however homely—nay, of three, however straightforward.

Place her before a meeting with a full, type-written speech (which she called her notes) in her hand, and it would flow easily from her lips. Her delivery was worthy of all praise. It was her power of connected thought when on her legs that was wanting to the poor soul. She had everything else—a far-carrying, metallic voice, a total disregard of time, an imposing presence, large, impressive gestures, a formidable reputation—which make for success on the platform. But, deprived of the written word, she was mute. Hitherto, in the whole course of her public career, she had never been caught unprepared. She was accustomed before making a speech to peruse it care-

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fully, chiefly to refresh her memory of the marginal notes in red ink—humorously—pathetic—raise right hand—break in voice—strike table—pick up watch—indignation here—eyes up—almost whisper this, and so forth. With such an address as the famous “Deadly Poison,” which she had delivered a score of times, ten minutes was ample for this purpose. This preliminary review was not a *sine qua non*. But the written speech was, for, lacking confidence, she was sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

Unless her package of orations were placed in her hands before she rose to address her audience in the schoolroom, she must remain dumb as a fish in their presence.

Her reputation as the finest woman speaker in England was threatened with extinction. It hung on the discovery of a bag.

Can we wonder, then, that she urged on the other members of the party to the search, with words that were almost frantic in their appeal?

Can we wonder that she was now engaged in a mad hunt through the hall, the porch, and the sitting-room? Leyborne too was diligent; Bouverie had joined in. Mrs. Tichborne had been

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summoned and sent to explore the back regions of the house. Isabel was despatched to the mulberry tree to see if by any chance the bag was still there. Every place where a bag could or could not be was examined; the back of the sofa, the interior of the coal-scuttle, the drawers of the dining-room sideboard, the shelves in the porch, the oak chest in the hall (a heavy box of books had to be taken off its top).

Bouverie excelled every one else in the activity of his search. It was he who suggested taking up the rug in the hall, moving the piano, and looking on the top of the eight-foot bookshelf in the sitting-room. Wherever he went an earthquake seemed to have been at work. The gay fellow had not had such a time with furniture since he had helped in the ragging of a smug's rooms at Peterhouse.

Why the old woman persisted in declaring that the bag which she had taken from old Katawampus on the lawn was her bag and contained her speeches, when he knew very well that it was his bag and full of Three Star and Calumets, he never troubled to consider. Had he stopped seriously to grapple with the problem, he would

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probably have come to the conclusion that old Gooseberry had, at the instigation of his missis (a secret drinkah), sneaked the thing for the sake of its contents and that they were now trying, with extraordinary nerve, to pass it off as their own. The flight of fancy necessary to arrive at the existence of twin bags was totally beyond our unimaginative friend.

"But as soon as it turns up," he told himself, "I'll put in a claim, and if they stick to their yarn, I'll expose 'em."

The clock struck seven. And not a sign of the bag.

"My ear is becoming very painful again," said Mrs. Wildbore. "I shall not go to the meeting."

"The meeting," said Leyborne, who stood in the porch, "is coming to you."

Mrs. Wildbore stepped out of the hall, and looked in the direction of his pointing finger.

A compact body of women—in number about fifty, besides little children—was advancing towards the house.

At their head marched the Rev. Mr. Strongith'arm, his great face wreathed in proud and happy smiles. Immediately behind him, the nu-

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cleus of this Army of Temperance, came the Clarinda Wildbore Tent of Rechabites, in full regalia, bearing aloft their banner, of which the most prominent feature was a colossal picture of their godmother, herself. The likeness to Mrs. Wildbore was not very apparent, for among the women of the New Forest the art of portraiture in tapestry is subordinated to those of a more practically useful character, cheese-making, for example, turnip-thinning, and chicken-raising. But the embroideresses of Berwick Abbas had caught several salient features of their model. Working, as they had done, from a twenty-year-old photograph, they had contrived to group on their canvas jet-black hair laid tightly over the forehead, an indoor cap of lace and ribbon, pendulous earrings, a white tucker under the chin, and the eyes, nose and mouth of a human being. But at no time of her life had Mrs. Wildbore suffered from the deplorable strabism which they had succeeded in introducing. Perhaps some doubt as to the portrait's success had assailed their minds, for, that there might be no mistake, the words "Clarinda Wildbore" were placed beneath it for all to see.

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As they caught sight of Mrs. Wildbore, her prospective audience raised a lusty cheer, which Mr. Strongi'th'arm stimulated with three sweeps of his low-crowned black felt hat. Then: "One! Two! Three!" he shouted, and they burst into "Hold the Fort."

One verse brought them to the porch, where they halted, lowered the poles of the banner to the ground, and, after another round of cheering, were silent, smiling expectantly.

"Here we are," said Mr. Strongi'th'arm, lest Mrs. Wildbore should have overlooked the fact. "If you are ready, dear lady, I will take the chair and we will proceed."

Mrs. Wildbore lost her head. She had one chance, to say resolutely, "I am very ill, and can under no circumstances address the meeting," and to faint with all expedition. She did not take it.

"But," she faltered instead, "I thought it was arranged, was it not?—the schoolroom——"

"At seven," said the curate. "Perfectly. But on such an evening shall we sit frowsting in the schoolroom? A crowded meeting—coming out into the damp night air. You must not run the risk, Mrs. Wildbore."

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He turned the eye of a dachshund detected in fault towards Isabel, who at this evidence of his resourcefulness almost admired him.

"Now," he went on, maintaining his advantage, "let us arrange the platform, and while we do so, you women,"—he turned to his followers—"let us hear what you can do. 'The Barrel,' please. One! Two! Three!" And the Clarinda Wildbores burst into that stirring chorus—

The barrel is a mighty foe,  
The bowl is a deceiver,  
But we can slay them at a blow  
And take the pledge for ever.

They sang it with conviction and power, and Mr. Strongi'th'arm, to whom love lent an invincible force this day, took the bass in the intervals of bustling chairs out in front of the porch, and directing the arrangement of the platform.

By the time the end of the song was reached, a semicircle of chairs was in position, with a table in the middle. Not even the orthodox glass of water was forgotten. Better still, the platform was seated. Mr. Strongi'th'arm was in the chair, Mrs. Wildbore sat frozen in a fau-



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teuil on his right, and the other members of the Mulberry Farm party were disposed on either hand of the irresistible curate, who rose to his feet, coughed, and began.

Mr. Strongi'th'arm, in his struggle against adversity, may have excited your sympathy. His speech, were I to repeat it verbatim, would deprive him and me of all your consideration.

But as I hold that a novel should serve in some degree a serious end, and as I cannot recollect that in this one anything of the sort has yet been achieved, let me (at the eleventh hour) indicate the principal features of his opening remarks. My book may fall into the hands of some young man who is about to embrace a career of public usefulness, and what follows will, I trust, serve him as a guide to the successful accomplishment of a task, the most difficult of any he may have to undertake.

Mr. Strongi'th'arm, then, began by assuring his audience that he was quite sure they would be glad to hear that he did not propose to take up very much of their time. For ten minutes he expounded the duty of brevity incumbent on chairmen, concluding by stating that he was too deeply

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sensible of the privilege which they all enjoyed this evening in having a lady so gifted as Mrs. Wildbore among them to encroach with any valueless observations of his own, upon the limited time at her disposal. Mrs. Wildbore, he said, needed no introduction to this meeting. Everybody present knew what she had done. So he told them, for thirteen and a half minutes, dwelling particularly on the high gifts of oratory which distinguished her from all living speakers, and trusting that he was not betraying a secret in informing them that the subject of her to-night's speech was "Deadly Poison." He then related three suitable humorous anecdotes, thanked them all for their considerate attention, perorated for twenty-seven seconds and sat down.

Rising again instantly, he called on the audience to sing "A Drunkard—yet a man!"

During the rendering of this admirable composition, in which it is difficult to say whether the words are more happily wedded to the music or the music to the words, Mrs. Wildbore sat upright in her chair, staring into vacancy. She was endeavouring to recall the opening sentences of twenty different speeches at once.

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Mr. Leyborne might have been observed (had not every eye been focused on the principal speaker) to lean sideways from his chair and drop a hand behind a large clump of Sweet William.

As for Mr. Wildbore, without a thought for his wife's distressing situation, he was wholly employed in thanking Providence for the unlooked-for, the marvellous, the never-to-be-too-much-appreciated disappearance of the bag. For the first time since we met him in the morning, his face wore a look approaching the unapprehensive. Sunk in selfish indifference to Clarinda's difficulty (to which he was fully alive) he sat there with something akin to a smile on his face. "The bag is lost," he was saying to himself. "The bag is lost. It is lost! Oh dear, what a comfort that is! The bag is lost."

The last verse of "A Drunkard—yet a man" was well under way when he felt a touch on his arm, and a voice said in his ear, "I give you one more chance."

Looking round he perceived that Leyborne, his neighbour, held on his knees a yellow bag.

The aeronaut who, sailing serenely among the clouds, suddenly discovers that his balloon has

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burst, experiences to a lesser degree the horror which now invaded the soul of Mr. Wildbore.

For the fraction of a second he seemed to see his wife drawing out the brandy-bottle in the face of New Forest Teetotalism. He tilted back his hat, covered his eyes with one hand, and with the other he clutched Leyborne's wrist and said: "Detestable young man, I yield. I give you back your promise."

"And Isabel?" asked Leyborne.

"And Isabel," said Mr. Wildbore. "What are you doing?" he almost shrieked.

Leyborne had risen from his chair and was moving deliberately towards Mrs. Wildbore, bag in hand.

This act of hideous perfidy deprived Mr. Wildbore of all power of thought and speech and motion. He watched Leyborne's movements numbly, as the prisoner in the dock watches the Chairman of the Bench consulting with the Clerk as to whether the fine shall or shall not be optional.

The sounds which the Clarinda Wildbores were making ceased, and Mr. Strongi'th'arm, with a confidential glance to the right, announced "Mrs. Wildbore."

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At the same moment Leyborne placed the bag in her hands. "I have just found it," he said softly.

She bestowed on him a look of abject gratitude. She clutched the bag. Mr. Wildbore saw her open it. He saw her eyes gleam. He dropped his face into his hands and huddled himself together with a low groan.

He listened for his name.

"Ladies and gentlemen," came the clear, confident voice of his wife. "Alcohol may be defined as a deadly irritant poison——"

He took courage to look in the direction of Clarinda.

There she stood in the well-known attitude, her body bent earnestly forward, facing the audience without a sign of perturbation or embarrassment. And in one hand was the speech for which, eight hours earlier, he had ransacked the bag three times. And the bag itself, its mouth open, lay within a foot of the other hand, which rested, knuckles downward, lightly on the table—bare.

"Clarinda," shrieked Mr. Wildbore, "be careful! The snake!"

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His wife continued her discourse, not so much as condescending to notice the interruption.

Why?

She had not heard him.

For the cry which he had uttered, though it sounded like thunder in his own ears, had amounted to little over a whisper.

But Leyborne heard it. And Bouverie heard it.

And the first laid his hand on the overwrought old gentleman's wrist, and breathed in his ear the comforting words: "The snake is scotched, Mr. Wildbore."

And the other slapped his own knee and cried softly: "By Gad! Sunny Jim sees it and I don't. Then I *am* cured."

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## CHAPTER XVI

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### Escape of a Serpent

**G**OOD night, old friend," said Mr. Bouverie. "And once more congratulations. Sly dog! Thought there was something suspicious in your comin' down heah. Charmin' spot. Old woman's all over you and everything in the garden's lovely."

"Lovely," said Leyborne. "Pleasant dreams, Bouverie," and he went into his room.

Bouverie stood in the passage irresolutely for a moment. Then he opened Leyborne's door. "Old man," he said, "I'm cured now, ain't I? Can't I have a cigarette? I shall never get to sleep."

"No," said Leyborne. "Go to bed."

"You are dashed cruel," said Bouverie with a heavy sigh. "You doctors have no bowels of compassion."

"Not a bow," said Leyborne cheerfully, as he pulled off a boot. "Good night. I'll hear you

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## ESCAPE OF A SERPENT

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snoring in ten minutes. No snakes to-night, eh?" and he laughed.

Bouverie went out, offended, into the passage, closed the door gently behind him and sought his own room. He struck a match, and uttered an exclamation of delight. On the chest of drawers lay his bag. He stood gloating upon it until the match burned his fingers. He dropped it, forgetting in his joy to swear, and tremblingly lit another. Yes, it was true. This was no hallucination. The thing was there.

He lit the candle. Then he listened for a moment intently.

He could hear Leyborne moving about in the next room. His cry had not attracted that infernal doctor's notice.

He turned the key in the door cautiously  
Then he had a different thought.

"No," he said to himself, "this is where Mr. Bloomin' Leyborne's goin' to make his little mistake. He's just put that there to test me. I see through him. Thinks I'll get blind and then he'll say, 'Told you so!' That's what he thinks. Wants to show me I've no will o' me own. Well, I'll show *him*. Now," he said in a firm voice, "I



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## GREAT-SNAKES!

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am goin' to take out that bottle and stick it up where I can see it, and I'm goin' to bed and I'm goin' to fix my eyes on it, and I'm goin' to sleep."

He unlocked the door.

"Now," he said, "he can come in to-morrow mornin' and pay me as many surprise visits as he pleases. He'll find the bottle unopened, and me untight, and he'll have to own I'm to be trusted."

He opened the bag and took out the bottle.

"A cigarette I *will* have," he said, and had it.

He put the bottle on the dressing-table by the candle, and, sitting on the bed, regarded it with emotion.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, "cork's been drawn. Pretty cool of Leyborne, that. Collars my brandy for his own use, does he? He's secret drinkah, too. Pity. Nice girl, that. Too good to marry secret drinkah. Thought she'd know better with her experience of shockin' old father and mother. Both confirmed secret drinkahs. Damm! Everybody's secret drinkah here but me. I'll show 'em. Where's the tooth-glass?"

He found the tooth-glass. "No," he said, "I'm dashed if I do." He put the tooth-glass back in its place and resumed his meditations.

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## ESCAPE OF A SERPENT

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"Now," he thought, "I didn't buy that brandy for Leyborne. Jolly fine example he sets me, don't he? If *he* can't keep off it how the devil does he expect *me* to? But of course he's not a poor drunkard. Oh, no. He's respectable medical man, Leyborne is. *He* can take one glass and stop. Well," he cried angrily, "so can I. Moderate drinkah, that's the thing to be. I don't want a drink," he said, "but on principle I ought to have it."

He rediscovered the tooth-glass.

"I hope Leyborne understands that he's *forcin'* me to do this," he remarked. "I shall have one nip. Then I will cork it up and go to bed. One nip to the health of the happy payah."

He removed the cork from the bottle and turned its nose to the glass. He lowered it still farther. No result.

"Has he swallowed the lot?" he cried. "Darned, that's a little bit too good." He tilted the bottle till it was completely inverted.

'And then the albino blind-worm came out with a rush, slid over the table, out of the window and so, via the wistaria, to the ground and liberty.

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## GREAT SNAKES!

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The bottle fell from Mr. Bouverie's hand and knocked over the candle. As darkness descended on him a shuddering cry rent the silence of the house.

The door was thrown open, and Leyborne, candle in hand, stood in the opening.

"What the devil's the matter?" he asked, with admirable innocence.

\* \* \* \* \*

About half an hour later, Bouverie, tucked up in Leyborne's bed, with a composing draught in his interior, turned a sleepy eye on his friend and remarked—

"Good night, old man. Very good of you—lemme have your bed. Done you injustice, Leyborne. Convinced now must go quite slow. No will o' me own. Saved me, that's what you've done. Like do something for you, Leyborne."

"Shall I tell you what?" asked Leyborne.

"Certainly. Anything in reason."

"Be my best man in December. I think you deserve it."

"Prou', ole fla."

"But you must keep off it meanwhile."

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## ESCAPE OF A SERPENT

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"Deligh'."

"And ever afterwards."

"Ever af—ri'to!"

And he has.

**THE END**

**[207]**

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